

Plucking the Strings Redux

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Authorized Posting! A chance encounter early in Naruto's life will irrevocably change the path he takes. His goal is different and so are his methods. The world looks very different with the Puppeteer of Konoha plucking the Strings

Status: ongoing

Published: 2016-12-25

Updated: 2017-10-21

Words: 25724

Chapters: 4

Rated: Fiction M - Language: English - Genre: Adventure/Fantasy -
Reviews: 107 - Favs: 616 - Follows: 720

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12288523/1/Plucking-the-Strings-Redux>

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1

This is posted with the knowledge, consent, and, in fact, express permission of the original author (Digitize27), who gave us leave to take up the story when it had been abandoned. Despite the original author planning to return to writing, we confirmed our clearance to proceed with our plans. Thank you.

"We are only puppets, our strings are being pulled by unknown forces." - George Buchner

Among the civilian population of the Elemental Nations, there were many thoughts regarding the Hidden Villages that fell across the map. Most thought of them as simple settlements, containing garrisons of shinobi ready to leave at a word's notice from their leader-their Kage when it concerned the major five. Others thought of them with scorn or jealousy. Few, however, believed them to be simple villages, each with a bustling, vibrant life, echoing with merchants calling out their wares, children running through the streets or parks, and generally filled with activity. Nevertheless, that was exactly what the Hidden Villages were.

Shinobi were an ever-present fact for the citizens of Konohagakure no Sato, so tightly entwined with the nature of the village, but for the most part, they worked in the background. Their main presence in the eyes of the village was in the many D-ranked "missions" that were the bane of every genin's life. The only other place where civilian and shinobi really met was the Academy-squirreled away near the Hokage tower with the ever-present monument to Hokage past and present looming overhead in silent vigil.

Here children were brought at the tender age of six to be first introduced to the life of their home's silent guardians. Slowly, over the years, they would not only learn that lifestyle, but adopt it for

themselves, training body and mind to the service of the village. In those first, early years, however, when their bodies were still untrained and their minds still naïve and idle fantasies of rescuing princesses and flamboyant techniques still crowded their thoughts, their studies were more mundane.

This morning, with the summer sun burning hotly overhead, there was one six-year-old not in class. Uzumaki Naruto sat on a rooftop that gave him a prime view of the Academy a street away. At first glance, it might be thought he was simply skipping history class due to boredom. But Naruto was incredibly interested in the history of his village; they often told tales of the shinobi who had come before and their rise to fame and power and of the battles that won them their acclaim.

In fact, Naruto had chosen this spot because despite the small rebellious streak running through him, he wanted to be caught. It would be simple enough for his sensei to notice his absence and, with a single glance out the window, spot him sitting there, staring at his classroom. It had already been half an hour since the start of class and Naruto was still sitting there, slowly swinging his legs back and forth as his posture grew increasingly slumped and despondent. His hands flexed on their own, drumming his nails rhythmically on the tiles of the roof until he finally jumped to his feet, an irritated scowl plastered on his whiskered face.

"Fine then, -ttebayo! If they don't want me, then I don't need them!" The young, spiky-haired blond angrily ran across the roof, jumping the small gap before grabbing a nearby drainpipe and sliding all the way to the ground. Normally, even in a hidden village, any watchers seeing the feat would have been surprised that such a young child was able to execute the maneuver. In this case however, anyone spotting this *particular* child would have turned away before it would be possible to be surprised; no one wanted to see *that* child.

Landing in a crouch, Naruto quickly took off in a random direction, swiping at his face to remove the slight dampness that had entered

his eyes. He had sworn long ago that he would never cry anymore. It never got him anything anyway.

When the old man who Naruto would later realize was in fact the Hokage first told Naruto that he would be entering the Academy, his childish mind had done the same thing so many others had: conjured up images of death-defying missions, awesome jutsu that would make him powerful, and, most importantly, praise from thankful clients-more than anything, Naruto craved that precious acknowledgement of his worth.

Before he had joined the Academy, Naruto had loved those rare days when he could walk up to a group of kids playing Ninja and they would allow him to join in. The next day though, like clockwork, when he returned they would turn on him and either run away or tell him to leave. He had caught more than a few suspicious or hostile looks from the parents when he approached their children, to the point that he had stopped trying; he preferred to sit by himself and listen to their happy cries so that when he closed his eyes, he could, just for a short while, pretend he was part of that world.

The Academy was supposed to be different; he would be joining other kids seeking to become shinobi. They would be learning together, as classmates. His hopes had been soundly crushed within the first week as children and sensei alike ignored him at best or treated him as if he carried some disease.

At first, he had tried to persevere, hoping that if he showed he was good enough, like that Sasuke boy, they would see how amazing he was-that he had value. But a lot of the kids seemed to have training before the Academy and there were a lot of things he didn't understand in class-he refused to ask questions, though; that would make him seem stupid.

There's only so much a young child can take though, which was why the blond was running away from the Academy where he was so obviously unwanted, just like the rest of the village. He paused in a lonely street for a few seconds to catch his breath and consider

where he should go now. A pang of guilt passed through him when he thought of the Ichiraku. That was his first thought—returning to the place that felt warm and safe. But Teuchi and Ayame had seemed so happy when he told them he was entering the Academy and the idea of telling them that he had given up was too painful.

A burst of determination flooded the young boy. He hadn't given up yet! Just as he resolved to return to the Academy, he walked out of the side street and directly into a large man going past. After a few mumbled curses, the man continued on with barely a passing glance at the village pariah, leaving the young child sitting on the dusty street clutching his head and suppressing tears. He looked up and saw a large building he had only ever noticed when he passed it on the trip from his small apartment to the Academy: the library.

With a bright grin, Naruto jumped to his feet. Shibuki-sensei's words about the library flashed through his mind. He had told the class the library was a place they could go to supplement their learning, but Naruto had never bothered with it before because reading was difficult for him. If it would help him become an awesome shinobi his classmates would respect and admire... then he'd try just about anything. That was why, about ten minutes later, he was happily walking out of the building with a stack of books so high it almost cut off his sight of the street in front of him.

He had expected some trouble from the librarian, but the bored-looking man lounging behind the desk (a chūnin, judging from the man's forest-green flak jacket) had barely given him a second glance. It still bothered Naruto how easily the adults ignored him, as if his existence were something so irrelevant as to be overlooked, but if it helped him this time then he wouldn't complain this time. That was why there was an almost-true smile on his face, turning his eyes into fox-like slits as he jogged towards the training grounds reserved for Academy students. There was one that was fairly far away from the Academy that he was fond of because it was also fairly near to the *real* training grounds so Naruto could catch the sounds of full shinobi sparring.

As he sat down on the soft grass, books spread out around him like petals of a flowering ninja, he couldn't help but feel like this was a turning point for him.

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"Ah screw this -ttebayo!" Naruto clutched a book on chakra theory in a white-knuckled grip over his head. The only thing stopping him from throwing it across the clearing was the librarian's parting warning about damaging the books. Instead, he set the book down on the pile of other books he had tried to read, only to be stymied by words he didn't understand, diagrams that hurt his head to look at, and sometimes even confusing titles. Later, he would realize that choosing the most advanced books he could find on a subject was a poor choice, but at that moment, he was just frustrated at his own inability.

He jumped to his feet so he could run through some exercises; he figured he could at least work on his fitness, since it was the only thing he seemed to have over the rest of the class. He was unaware that he hadn't been alone in the training ground for a while now. A single eye watched him curiously from a tree.

"Aren't you supposed to be in school, kid?"

Naruto was so shocked by the sudden voice that he spun around and, in doing so, tripped over a haphazardly-stacked pile of books, ending up in a heap on the grass and looking up dazedly at the silver-haired shinobi who was staring at him with amusement. At least, Naruto *assumed* it was amusement, since the man wore a mask and had his headband tilted over one eye, leaving the remaining eye that was currently closed in a facsimile of a smile. The blond quickly gathered his bearings and scrambled to his feet with an indignant look on his face.

"What's it to you, Cyclops?" To his frustration, what little of the man's amused expression could be seen didn't change the slightest and

the man simply chuckled as he looked down at the stacks of books surrounding the boy.

"Well, I was heading to a training ground and spotted you here, seemingly deep in thought. While I admire your work-ethic, kid, maybe your studies would be a bit more effective with an actual sensei."

Naruto glared at the man suspiciously for a moment, thinking about what to say. "This isn't the way to the training ground, Cyclops."

Far from being caught off guard, the man only chuckled again, shrugging before scratching his head almost helplessly. "Oh, well, I guess I got lost on the road of life again. Oh, and my name is Hatake-Jōnin, not 'Cyclops'."

Naruto blinked at the response. The more time he spent with this man, the more confused he got. "Yeah, well, whatever. I'm not going back to that place!"

Hatake quirked the single, visible eyebrow and looked off absently in the direction of the academy. "Oh, is that so? How do you expect to become a shinobi then?" The older ninja seemed like he wanted to chuckle again, considering Naruto was looking increasingly like a wet bird, drooping rapidly. "Judging from those books, that *is* what you're planning."

"I'll do it myself!" Snapped Naruto. "I don't need people who don't want me."

Kakashi tilted his head a little, reminding Naruto of a dog, before giving that pseudo-smile again. "And I see that is going so well for you, yes?" His tone was thinly veiled sarcasm as he gestured with one hand at the books lying on the ground, none of them opened past the tenth page.

For the first time in the conversation, Naruto allowed something other than indignation to show as his face turned a pale red. "I-it's

not my fault if the books all use stupid, long words. They should just say what they are trying to say -ttebayo."

Hatake suddenly surprised the boy by plopping down beside him, his head cocking to the other side as he seemed to peer right through Naruto. Infuriatingly, even sitting down, he was *still* at eye-level with the diminutive six-year-old. He just looked at Naruto until the boy was beginning to get weirded out before the man finally gave a thoughtful hum. "No."

Naruto blinked at the man. He had been silent for so long that when he finally spoke, Naruto had been expecting... more. "No?"

The man nodded, seeming to smile again, as if he had come across some great revelation with the simple word. "No, I don't think your problem is the books. *Or* the Academy. After all, you seemed pretty quick to give up on both."

Suddenly, Naruto's face was red for a wholly different reason as he bristled, much to Hatake's further amusement. "Hey! I didn't give up, dattebayo!"

Much to Naruto's chagrin, Hatake simply waved away his angry words as if he were shooing an irritating puppy. "Sure, sure. But like I was saying: they aren't your problem." When Naruto paused just as he was beginning to grow more indignant, the man went on. "Your problem is that you lack a goal."

Naruto blinked, his anger vanishing as he slowly sank to the ground, his shoulders slumping a little. "A goal?"

Hatake gave him that eye-smile as he watched the boy enter a more contemplative state of mind. "Uh-huh. A goal-a driving force behind what you do. A motivation so you don't just quit as soon as it becomes a little difficult. If you have a goal, then you have a reason to keep going forward. Right now, you have no goal and consequently, you just want things to be easy."

Naruto looked sheepish at that as the jōnin motioned to the books again before looking up at the man questioningly. "So? What should my goal be?"

Hatake only shrugged, still wearing that odd expression of his. "I can't really tell you that, kid. It has to be something you tell yourself, otherwise it's pointless. A goal given by someone else is just another assignment you won't care about."

Naruto frowned at that, internally pondering just what his goal could be. It started to make him think about why he did anything in a village that didn't seem to want him, which just made him depressed, like they always did when he was alone with his thoughts. It was one reason he was so fond of distracting himself, so he wouldn't have to think about things like that.

"But you know..." Naruto looked up to see Hatake looking at him, smile gone and a more thoughtful expression on what was visible of his face. "... a lot of powerful shinobi, say the Hokage, for example, make their goal to become strong enough to protect what's important to them and..."

Naruto was listening with rapt attention now, feeling he was on the verge of something important.

"And, like the Hokage, you need to start at the bottom-in the Academy. The beginning of a thousand-mile journey may not be the most exciting part, but you can't skip to the end, you have to take that first step and walk the path." Hatake chuckled at the boy and ruffled his hair.

Naruto groaned, glaring at the ground before removing himself from under the jōnin's hand. "Fine. I get it -ttebayo. I'll go back."

Hatake rose and gave Naruto a mock salute. "Don't worry too much, kid. Once you have a goal, I just know you'll do well." With that, he suddenly flickered and vanished, leaving Naruto with an awestruck expression on his face.

Naruto walked a few steps towards where the jōnin had been, only to look down when his foot landed on something other than grass. At first glance, he thought it was one of the books he'd gotten from the library, but it was too small.

He picked up the book and found that it was a nondescript black, but the make was remarkable in its own way. It wasn't made of paper, for one thing. It was some sort of parchment that smelled wrong to him. The scent was not unlike almonds. Also, the books from the library had been made with thick thread and something that looked like glue holding the pages together. Instead of that, this was held together with wire and the spine was matte black metal riveted together.

Naruto flipped the book open and was startled to find that the pages were filled with profiles of different ninja, some of them marked as nukenin, others with designations for their village. "Hey Cycl-er, Hatake-san!" the blond called out into the trees. When no answer came, he looked back down at the book, wondering how the man had managed to drop it. He shrugged and threw it onto the pile of books he had to return and frowned as he realized he was going to have to carry them all.

True to his word, Naruto did go back to the Academy later that day, simply walking into the class during the third period and sitting down. The teacher said nothing and continued the class without even noting the appearance of the boy, while the kids whispered amongst themselves about how the "troublemaker" had returned. Instead of his usual, loud self, Naruto was surprisingly withdrawn during the day, thinking about the little book now in his orange hoodie's front pocket.

He had tried to return it at the library when he brought back the other books; with his limited knowledge, he assumed that was what one did with books, but the chūnin had told him that the library didn't take back books that it hadn't leant out in the first place. So now Naruto was holding on to it. He drummed his fingers on the table while the book felt heavier and heavier in his pocket. Looking up, he saw the teacher was writing math equations up on the board, complicated

things Naruto couldn't even begin to work out. Without thinking, Naruto reached into his pocket and began tracing the black leather of the frontispiece.

He discretely took it out and opened it, idly flicking through the first couple of pages. At first, it was just curiosity, it was filled with page after page of powerful shinobi and assorted bits of information about them. However, the more he read, the more he was engrossed by the subjects of the book. These were shinobi and kunoichi from all across the Elemental Nations; their headbands had what seemed like every symbol Naruto had ever heard of and some he hadn't. Some were scratched out and had notations of their treason against their village. He was fascinated; they had such vast and varied skill-sets and had become powerful through such different methods... it drew him in.

Then it happened: Naruto flipped the page and there, at the top where a shinobi's rank was noted, was the large, bold "S". Naruto paused, looking the page over and blinking, sure he'd read it wrong. He hadn't. This was a shinobi given the highest ranking for danger and skill possible. *Akasuna no Sasori*. The name wrote itself across the inside of his eyes in fire. He felt something shifting inside him. Something huge.

At first glance, Naruto could see a lot of similarities between himself and the young redheaded teenager staring out of the page with a cold, blank expression. As Naruto read on, he only grew more intrigued. It didn't matter that this man was a nukenin-this youth had already warranted the highest ranking a ninja could be awarded (setting aside "official" ranks like Kage).

One word leapt out at him: Puppeteer. There it was. The concept was what compelled him to read on about the man whose moniker was "Red Sand" because of the rivers of blood he'd spilled. It appealed to him on a level he refused to even admit he still had. Building puppets would be like building his own friends-ones that would never leave because they were extensions of him. Fighting with them would be even better because it meant he would always

have a team to back him up. Slowly, a grin split his face for the first time in a long while.

He was disappointed when he reached the end of the profile. He flipped through the book, skimming now to just check the ranks of the other ninja. Mostly the book was filled with B's and A's. There were a few other S-rank shinobi, but none with so varied a set of skills. None struck Naruto as being as fearsome as the boy with his own army. None of them had their own friends.

And just like that he had found it. His goal.

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Naruto was tempted to just leave the class right away; he felt the burning *need* to be doing something to further his newfound goal. He briefly realized that this was what Hatake-san had meant when he spoke about goals. No wonder shinobi with great goals became so strong; they had this same thing driving them onwards. It was only the flickering beginnings and he already could tell that this was something that would become the focus of his life and spur him to the greatness he desired-greatness that would mean the world would have to acknowledge his being. But Naruto had promised himself that he would attend the Academy because Hatake-san had convinced him to do so. So he would attend the Academy and learn.

So the day dragged on and on for him. He wanted to be doing something. When the Academy finally let out, he raced from the classroom. It took him minutes to reach the library. The bored chūnin was still there, leaning back in his chair and reading through some small, orange book.

To Naruto's annoyance, when asked about puppetry, the only response the man gave was a single, raised eyebrow. Then he got a snort and the man walked into the aisles. What he returned with was a beginner's guide for puppetry. For children. As in for amusing children.

"What's this -ttebayo?" The blond's brow was drawn as he scowled at the book. When the chūnin ignored him in favor of the orange book, Naruto chuckled the one in his hands at the man.

The man jerked to the side, dodging the ballistic text, but it did get his attention. "What the hell was that for, gaki?" he cried indignantly, throwing his own book down on his desk.

"That isn't the book I asked for!" Naruto pointed at the colorful book behind the chūnin.

"It's a book on puppetry!" replied the man. He scooped up the book and tossed it at Naruto. The book slammed into the blond's chest, knocking the wind out of him.

"The... stupid kind -ttebayo!" Naruto managed, when he got air back into his lungs. He wasn't interested in civilian entertainment techniques; he wanted awesome puppets-scary and powerful.

The chūnin looked at him strangely, one brow raised in confusion. "Wait. You mean that ninja 'art' the sand-lice use? Why would you want to know about that junk?"

Naruto pointed at himself triumphantly. "I'm going to be the best puppeteer ever."

It took a moment to get a response. Then the chūnin burst out laughing. He snickered as he picked up the book from the floor and walked back into the shelves. He was still snorting when he returned. "That's a good one, kid. A Konoha shinobi puppeteer?" He wiped a tear from his eye. "Sorry to burst your bubble, but that's a Suna 'art' and they're damned protective of their secrets."

Naruto looked down. "Hey kid," Naruto looked up. The chūnin had a small smile on his face and offered Naruto a small book. "If you really want, that's what we've got on the subject." When Naruto snatched the text from his hands, the chūnin grinned widely. "Go on, get out of here."

"I'll do it!" Naruto proclaimed. "I'll be the best puppeteer ever!"

"Knock yourself out, kid. If you manage, I can laugh at those sand-lice for having a prized 'art' figured out by some gaki." Naruto ignored the last comment and scampered from the library to his home, grinning at the fact that anyone was encouraging him at all.

It made him sad that it made him happy that the chūnin had given him a backhanded compliment like that. But he was the first one other than Hatake-san to show a sign that he even considered Naruto might achieve *anything*, let alone a dream.

That evening, Naruto sat down at the rickety table in his kitchen and examined the book. It was small, that he'd noticed already, but it was thin, too. Maybe forty pages all told and it didn't have any author. It didn't even have a title. It was just bound in grayish covers and slightly worn with age. It certainly had been neglected for a while, to judge from the dust on it and when he opened it, there was a smell of musty paper.

It was handwritten of course, but there were a dozen different handwritings. Each writer was recording his or her encounters with the Puppet Corps of Suna during the Second Shinobi War. There was precious little there.

What was described were crude and horrifying things. The puppets didn't sound elegant or even intimidating in of themselves. They were little more than logs strung together with some sort of joints and made to move to the puppeteer's will. But they had weapons hidden everywhere and poisons in every crevice and struck like a ninja from a distance that kept their wielder safe from harm.

He stayed up all night reading it over and over again, looking for anything useful. The sun was coming up when he sighed and sat back. There definitely wasn't anything technical about the puppets in the accounts. No one had captured one and brought it back for examination. There was no hint as to what kind of ninja craft was used to make them work. But he had begun to get a glimpse of how

they might function Everything seemed to come down to the chakra 'strings' that the Suna shinobi used. Now Naruto had to work out what chakra was.

There was a niggling feeling at the back of his mind that was telling him learning puppeteering might take a while and more than trips to the library.

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Naruto sat on his favorite stool in Ichiraku Ramen, slurping at noodles and listening to the bustle of the village around the stall. He reflected on the past few months as he ate. It had surprised him, but once he had set a goal for himself, he found it a lot easier to think of his own, instead of his thoughts drifting to the past unbidden and he focused on what was important to him. It was liberating. For example, he was amazed at the ease with which he unlocked his own chakra. He managed it just a few days after first learning about puppeteering from helpful instruction he found in book from the library.

Making his chakra *usable* on the other hand... that was much more difficult. Considering that they hadn't begun to teach anything about it in the Academy, despite many of the clan children having already unlocked theirs... he saw no help there. Instead, he was forced to rely on the place that was rapidly becoming a second home for him: the library. And even then, it was taking a long time.

The explanations in the various books were difficult to understand for a six-year-old, and especially for Naruto. He wanted to tell himself that it was because he was more at home doing than reading, but he knew that would be a lie. The fact was simply that he did not understand the words and that meant his progress was slow.

He had gotten to the point where he could expel his chakra from his fingers, which was definitely a step in the right direction. Unfortunately, every advance was met with another roadblock. At the moment, what was holding him back was the creation of strings from

his chakra. The problem was that chakra had no real substance. When it came out of his fingers, it was just a wispy, blue, steam-like substance, somewhere between a liquid and a gas. How he was supposed to turn that into something tangible that could actually latch onto a puppet was beyond him at the moment. And since Konoha had never invested time into working out how puppeteering worked (aside from some efforts to counter the Suna Puppet Corps which centered around counters to poisons) the library didn't really have much help to offer.

Maybe his control was simply lacking. While he could somewhat push and pull the wispy chakra he emitted, it wasn't with any precision. Maybe if he just worked harder at chakra control exercises he had read about, he could manage a short thread and then lengthen it over time? He sighed into his ramen, already feeling a familiar headache as he thought of all the leaves he was going to disintegrate once more in the name of perfecting that exercise.

"Why the long face, Naruto-kun?" Ayame was staring at him from the kitchen portion of the stand. Teuchi had stepped out for a while and she was working to prepare the dough that would become noodles. It always calmed him to watch her or Teuchi spinning the dough, stringing it out, spinning it more and more before pulling it again until they could create thin, thread-like...

Naruto's eyes widened as he stared down at his hands, wondering how stupid he had to be to have missed something so obvious. Suddenly, to Ayame's surprise, Naruto vaulted the counter and threw his arms around her, beaming up at her.

"You're the best, Ayame-nee-chan!" As quickly as he'd hugged her, he was gone, racing off in the direction of his apartment. The waitress-chef was left standing there, blinking and confused, before she shook herself and chuckled at his antics as she returned to her work.

The moment Naruto got home, he leapt over his couch and grabbed the small wooden doll he had left there the previous night. It was a

simple thing he'd stolen from the Academy. They used it in anatomy lessons and he had simply stolen it one day. He'd hoped having something to aim at would help him to create the strings, even though it hadn't, he kept it anyway. Now, though, he placed it in front of him with a grin. He felt through his body for the surging energy deep inside and brought it to the surface, focusing it into his fingertips.

Before, he had simply allowed the wispy blue energy to stream from his fingers in a loose cloud, now he did his best to spin it, trying to coil the insubstantial mist into a thread. His eyes widened as instead of the usual mist, he found an almost conical form exiting each fingertip. He was so surprised that he immediately lost control and the chakra dissipated into the air, but it didn't matter.

"Yes!" He jumped in the air and pumped his fist, dancing around the table. It wasn't a thread, but it was *something* and Naruto could work with that. He could feel his dream coming together.

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Naruto had no idea that it would take six months for progress to happen. That was an eternity for someone his age. He practiced every day after the Academy, though. And it still took six months before he could form anything that even vaguely resembled chakra strings. It was slow going because he was inefficient at forming them, even if it rarely burned him out the way the texts said it should. Even so, he would practice too hard and temporarily burn out the tenketsu on his fingertips. Each time he did, it cost him a day or two of practice-instead of the week or more that the texts said it should-but that meant time he couldn't practice anything useful to his goal while his tenketsu healed.

That wasn't to say he wasted his time. Once he got over his difficulties with the written word, he found that he could enjoy reading. Not only reading things useful to his objectives, either. Each book was a portal to a different world where he didn't have to remember his past or focus on the disgust or dismissal with which

the villagers treated him. Reading became a solace in a gray, empty world and he had taken to doing it in class sometimes, since his teachers clearly didn't care.

In the end, he had finally, *finally* managed to form the threads, only to realize that he had no idea how he was supposed to attach them to a puppet. Another three months passed before he worked out the trick by accident. He had gotten so frustrated and tired that after almost an hour of practicing yet again, his control began to fray and with it, so did the threads. When he was trying to repair the damage without reforming the threads from scratch, he noticed that they were still touching the doll and a twitch of his finger nearly flung the doll at him. Only falling out of his chair had saved him from being struck in the face by the flying wood.

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Naruto walked slowly through the streets of the village. He had just left the Academy for the last time that year. His first year of training was now over. Many of the other kids had rushed out ahead of him, eager to talk to their friends or otherwise enjoy the short month they had before their second year began. Naruto was content to simply stroll out. It was amazing how little he rushed now that he had somewhere to be.

He couldn't help but smile as he entered his apartment. It was unrecognizable compared to its state a year earlier. He had cleaned it obsessively once he realized that he could use his threads to move things around. And doubly so once he had begun to use the small doll to do simple chores, turning them into training.

From the door, he reached up, grinning as the thin, blue threads spun themselves from his fingers almost without thought and gripped the puppet sitting in its usual place on his table. A twitch of his thumb and ring finger had it take a confident step forward, turning its head to look at him. With his index and middle fingers, he forced the little figure to raise a hand and wave at him. He returned the gesture with his other hand, even as his fingers moved again, causing the figure

to jump from the table and rush over to hug his leg. There was always someone to greet him now.

For a few minutes, he made the doll run around, flipping and dancing as his fingers moved in complex patterns. It washed the dishes from his breakfast and had to jump to put them away. He laughed to himself at how the small figure sprang into the air to do it, doing an elaborate summersault as it did. Naruto had the doll run up the wall until it accidentally dislodged a piece of paper he'd tacked there.

He made the doll pick it up and bring it to him, sobering as he realized that it was the profile of Akasuna no Sasori, torn from the precious Bingo Book. He'd put it on his wall as a reminder of his goal.

He looked from the profile to the doll, whose head had ended up tilted towards him expectantly and frowned. He had no real reason to be happy right now. It took all of his fingers to control a puppet this small and his chakra threads glowed brightly. Compared to the mastery Sasori had over the art, this was pitiful. The man was reputed to control ten puppets at one time-more, if the stories in the Bingo Book were true. Only Sasori's grandmother and the ancient founder of the Puppet Corps, Monzaemon Chikamatsu, had ever accomplished that feat.

Naruto's hand clenched into a fist, causing the puppet to shrink in a facsimile of fear. He had much to do if he wanted to reach his goal. This was just the beginning.

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(A/N John)

Firstly: I am aware that this is not just a repost of the first chapter. I have the entire original manuscript printed and bound as well as the notes for plans and our additions. I am taking the time to retype the story and put my own touch to the work.

(A/N 2 John)

Secondly: This fic is going to be slow going because I have one major project ongoing and two minor fics I'd like to publish to get out of my hair. I have literally had this in the works since almost the day the original story was discontinued.

(A/N 3 John)

Thirdly: If you are expecting this to be a cheerful romp ala *Itachi*, kindly stop here. This is not a happy-go-lucky story, nor does it feature a kind protagonist.

(A/N 4 John)

Fourthly: Unlike *Itachi*, I knew how this one was going to end long before I started writing. There's not much that's likely to change.

Chapter 2

" Puppets seem like vampires sometimes. They live, and you're depleted." - Henry Selick

It was during his second year of shinobi training that Naruto realized that he truly despised the Academy. Normally, the seven-year-old would be hesitant to say he really hated anything. He *disliked* plenty of things, but to *hate* something required both strong feelings and having rationalized away any and all points with which the offending subject might redeem itself. The Academy met these requirements. Not only was the place filled with disappointments for the fledgling puppeteer, but he felt that he learned more from the library.

If it weren't for his promise to himself and Hatake-san a year ago, he would have abandoned the place entirely. It was hellish much of the time for him. The children had shunned him from the start, and he'd completely given up on trying to get their friendship or even attention. Instead, he preferred to keep the company of the puppets he was slowly building. The instructors likewise continued to ignore him so when he had a question, he didn't even bother trying to ask. Lessons contained so many useless things, at least for becoming a shinobi. He accepted that he might not have the whole picture on that point, though.

For instance, he had once asked a girl, out of sheer curiosity, what went on during the separate lessons the girls attended. After the initial surprise that the supposed troublemaker was actually talking to her-politely, no less-the girl had told him that they learned how to arrange flowers and similar things. Naruto had to choke back laughter. As it was, his snorts had led to the girl trying to defend the lessons, quoting her sensei as saying that it was for "infiltration purposes". At that, he had been unable to hold it in. He had walked through the seedier parts of Konoha-he lived in one of them-and he had seen the women there. He might only be seven, but he was

fairly certain that seduction and infiltration had nothing at all to do with arrangement of a colorful bouquet.

Taijutsu was so unbalanced that it seemed as though the instructors had no interest in giving the civilian children a *chance* to pass. They paired civilians up against clan children who had several years of training. Even the timid girl with the weird eyes beat her opponents in humiliatingly fast bouts-the fact that she apologized afterwards made it even more embarrassing.

Naruto was usually paired with the Uchiha boy, who was quite possibly the best at taijutsu in the class. The only one who came close to him was the lavender-eyed girl with the lightning-fast strikes. Naruto would always get defeated in swift and brutal fights. Of course, he rarely practiced his taijutsu in favor of further efforts with his puppets.

The day during second year he decided that he truly despised the Academy was also the day he had decided that he'd had enough of being beaten for the amusement of the Uchiha.

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" Ah, let's see... how about Uzumaki aaand... ," Anizawa-sensei made a show of considering, "Uchiha-san." Almost immediately, the young Uchiha strode into the ring, a simple affair made of a long rope to mark out a circular boundary. A few moments later, Naruto, who had been hanging towards the back of the waiting crowd, also entered the ring at a more sedate pace. Anizawa raised an eyebrow at the stiff way the blond was walking, but passed it off as irrelevant quickly. He had only called out the pair because it was amusing to watch the blond get beaten around the ring, never giving up even when he was obviously inferior.

" Make the seal of confrontations." Sasuke did so with a bored expression on his face, while Naruto held up his hand with an oddly passive look on his face as he slowly moved his fingers in the

traditional pattern. Seeing that they had both done so, Anizawa stepped out of the ring, hand held up before bringing it down.

" Hajime!" Instantly, the muttering and chatter of students talking to each other ceased as they realized that they hadn't heard the usual cry from Naruto that was part of the reckless charge at Sasuke he always used. Instead, the boy was slowly moving into what appeared to be a flawless opening stance of the Academy style, something no one remembered seeing him use before.

Deciding to just get this over with, Sasuke moved forwards. His speed was impressive for his age. He darted at the blond, figuring he would try and get for a one-hit knockout. He sent a straight punch at the boy's face, while actually intending to strike with his other hand into the boy's stomach. His eyes widened when Naruto's knee suddenly appeared between them, blocking his attack while at the same time leaning back to allow the feint to pass over his nose. Sasuke didn't have time to be shocked, though, because Naruto's leg snapped up in the perfect counter-kick from the Academy style and caught Sasuke on the chin with the blade of his foot. Sasuke landed just inside the edge of the ring.

The young Uchiha got up slowly, his eyes wide as he rubbed his chin. Blood was dripping from his lips where they'd split on impact with the blond's foot. That kick had felt like being struck by a shinai. His eyes went steely as he settled into the Interceptor style he had begun to learn from his father, a small smile beginning to play across his lips. In theory, the Interceptor style was only viable when used by someone with a Sharingan, but all it actually required was a speed advantage of a significant margin-Sasuke knew he had that from all his previous fights with Naruto.

When the two met again, Sasuke wasn't underestimating the blond again. He still had enough speed to use Interceptor block-and-counter attacks to strike the Uzumaki. He was more flexible-another requirement of the Interceptor style-and could strike from more angles while dodging. The problem was that it felt like he was striking a practice log instead of bare flesh and for all that he was

blocking the blond's attacks, the impacts felt like being struck with a club. What was worse was that Naruto didn't even seem to feel Sasuke's blows. His expression didn't even seem to change. And even worse than that was that Naruto was able to block some of his attacks as though he had eyes outside of the ring to see the feints for what they were.

Eventually, Sasuke was left panting on the ground, covered in dust and bruises while Naruto stood in that infuriatingly calm, stiff opening stance. Like the students, Anizawa has been watching in amazement and disbelief as the dead-last had actually beaten the top student in what was supposed to be Sasuke's specialty. Just as he was about to call the match-too late to preserve Sasuke's pride, he noticed something that made his eyes narrow.

"Wait a second!" Anizawa stepped into the ring and grabbed Naruto by the scruff of his neck, lifting him off his feet. The boy's expression never wavered from its mask-like blankness. He forced chakra into the "boy". The henge shattered. There was a puff of smoke and suddenly in place of the blond was a rough-hewn wooden mannequin. It looked like it was just a bunch of logs. Whatever Anizawa had been expecting, it wasn't that. Then he noticed the nearly invisible threads of blue emerging from the thing and disappearing into the crowd.

"Naruto," he snapped, "get out here!"

A few seconds later, Naruto walked out from the crowd of his classmates. He wasn't wearing his usual outfit. Instead, he wore a hooded, gray jacket, closed in the front. The sleeves were far too long and draped over his hands, concealing his fingers. The hood kept his face in shadow, concealing it entirely. He reached up and pulled back the hood, revealing whiskered cheeks and a smirk. Beneath the voluminous sleeves, his fingers twitched and the puppet jerked to life in Anizawa's hands and freed itself, trotting over to Naruto to stand beside him, one log-limb resting on his shoulder companionably.

"What do you think, Anizawa-sensei?" Asked Naruto. "Pretty cool, right? I call him Dami. He's pretty rough, I know, but considering he's my first life-size puppet, I'm pretty proud of him."

There was a long moment of silence as everyone gaped at him. Then Anizawa spoke. "Naruto, did you... make this thing?" When the blond nodded, Anizawa scowled. "And what you did back there, that was puppetry? Like Suna?" Another nod caused the chūnin to flounder for a moment. Despite himself, he was impressed that the dead-last Academy student had managed to reverse-engineer one of Sunagakure's prized techniques. At the same time, he was irritated that it was this student. Finally, he schooled his features.

"You're disqualified for cheating."

Naruto blinked. The smirk slipped from his face and he almost lost control of Dami, causing the puppet to twitch limply. "Wait, what?"

The chūnin huffed at the boy, poking the puppet's chest. "You cheated. Using ninjutsu and genjutsu in a taijutsu spar. Don't do it again or you'll have detention." He would have assigned detention on principle, but it would be really hard to explain if anyone asked and he had to admit it was for being able to use puppetry.

Naruto stared at the man, unsure that he had heard correctly. His classmates were, though.

"Yeah, don't be such a sore loser, dobe." That was Inuzuka Kiba, the wild-haired boy who was always trying to lead the class and thus instigated much of the trouble for Naruto.

"Cheater!"

"Yeah! There's no way Sasuke could lose to you fairly."

"Go play with your dolls somewhere else!"

And so on. Naruto's confused expression slowly turned dark. Even though the Academy always encouraged creativity and skill and taught that ninja fought to win, apparently Naruto was not allowed to. He pulled his hood up, shrouding his features and straightened, Dami at his side as he made to walk back into the crowd.

"Naruto," said Anizawa. "I'll be taking you to see the Hokage at the end of the day. He'll want to hear about your... extra-curricular activities."

Naruto froze, but didn't turn around. He nodded slowly and then vanished into the crowd, his "classmates" still jeering.

Oh yes. He hated the Academy.

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In Naruto's opinion, the utter shock on the Hokage's face that day, when he demonstrated his puppeteering was almost worth the jeers of his classmates. He had half-expected the pipe to fall from the man's lips when Dami waved casually at the old man. But the meeting had gone downhill from there, with the Hokage asking who had trained him in puppeteering.

That had hurt. He looked up to the Hokage as one of the few people kindly disposed towards him. To his young mind, it said the Hokage thought very little of him to even ask that question. And when Naruto had tried to defend himself, telling the Hokage he'd learned it on his own through trial and error, the man had asked for *proof* . Proof! The proof was the bandages running around Naruto's hands from when he burned out the tenketsu in his fingers. The proof was the sweat and blood he had poured into crafting Dami. The proof was in the endless hours he had spent in his apartment, long into the night as he learned to control the rough puppet until it could nearly imitate him.

It had taken far too long to convince the man that this was his own endeavor. By the end, Naruto had felt an almost physical pain every

time he saw the skepticism in the aged Kage's eyes. The final insult came as Naruto was leaving, disheartened and blinking back furious tears. The Hokage had the gall, the utter *nerve*, to tell Naruto he was proud of him. Proud! The man had spent the past half hour convinced that Naruto hadn't done the things he had and trying to coax Naruto into telling him who the mysterious trainer was. When he finally relented he was suddenly *proud* ?

As Naruto left the office, he made a silent vow to himself behind a face that was a cold, calm mask that hid his burning rage.

He'd show them *proud* .

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Umino Iruka was not normally the type of man to let his class see his moods, good or bad, but as he walked into the classroom, he didn't bother to hide his warm smile. Today was the graduation exam for his latest group of students. The young chūnin felt privileged to have taught what he believed to be the future of Konoha. This was one of the rare classes that was filled with the future heads of various clans and several promising young shinobi. Now he would see them off on the beginning of their long journey to become the shinobi he could already see them as.

He let his gaze drift around the room, feeling the touch of pride at the hopeful look on each face. Not all of them would receive a headband today, but those who would had worked hard and truly earned it. He caught a glimpse of the last Uchiha-that was a tragic story, but it hadn't stopped him from being rookie of the year. In the middle row were the heirs to Yamanaka, Hyūga, Akimichi, Nara, and Aburame clans, all either talking to one another or patiently waiting for class to start, as usual. All of them would become the backbone of the village in time. Even Kiba looked more happy than angry today, while he was not the heir to the Inuzuka, Iruka was sure Kiba was still destined to do great things for the village.

Then Iruka's eyes drifted over to *him* . The boy sat pretty much as far from the front of the room as possible while remaining present. Uzumaki Naruto was an enigma. The scarred chūnin had never understood him, not in the two years the class had been under his tutelage. According to Academy records, the boy had been boisterous and loud-mouthed, but during the second year, he had simply stopped and faded into the background. Around the same time, there was a rapid rise in the blond's grades, more than tutors could justify marking down.

Iruka had been furious to find that instructors had been marking down Uzumaki's papers for years. It was only their underhanded tactics that kept Uzumaki from displacing top students like Sasuke and Sakura. Academically, at least.

Physically, on the other hand, Uzumaki had not dropped in ranking, but that was only because he had never risen to drop lower. The cause of it was known, of course. Ever since the boy's "hobby" was first revealed, the blond had made it a challenge to sneak his puppets into the ring and he only got better thanks to his instructor's efforts to prevent it. By the time Iruka had taken over the class, he could only tell which was the puppet one time in ten. He supposed that was the exact point. Many other instructors often said it through gritted teeth, but no one could really disagree that the boy had demonstrated prodigious ability by reverse-engineering a secret art on his own.

And then, one day, it stopped. A week after the class entered Iruka's care, beginning their final two years, Uzumaki's grades took a plunge. That was why Iruka had gone back through the records; it was disturbing to see one of his students suddenly suffer like that. It was worse when he found that his student should have been top of the class for years. He had no idea why it was going on. It definitely wasn't for the reason that other instructors hoped for.

To Iruka, it was blatantly obvious that Uzumaki was purposefully lowering his grades. It almost felt as if Uzumaki were taunting the Academy, saying they could teach him nothing and didn't care. It hurt

Iruka to be dismissed by someone so clearly gifted. He wished Uzumaki would have let him nurture that skill. Instead, he was constantly riding the curve, keeping his grades just within graduation boundaries, making him the dead last once more. The only one lower than him was the Nara heir, and no one was shocked that he was technically not even *within* the graduating requirements.

What was worse, Uzumaki was rubbing out the correct answers. One day Iruka decided to mark the faded answers, as they were still technically correct. The next time Uzumaki returned a paper, the answers were so perversely wrong as to be insulting. At least one had nothing to do with the question, and instead was a discussion of breeding Iruka's mother with a dog. He'd taken the hint and graded Uzumaki's papers based on the answers that weren't faded, even if he always added a note praising the boy when he returned the test or homework.

Uzumaki always wore a hood these days. It kept his face shadowed, but Iruka had seen a smirk the day he'd turned in the rude homework. No one had an idea of why the boy would *want* to be the dead last. Actually, no one but Iruka and the Hokage believed that was what was happening. Everyone else just assumed that it was some sort of natural order reasserting itself. But the Hokage and Iruka puzzled over it, since Uzumaki had clearly exhibited signs of wanting praise and recognition.

The boy frequently missed a class or two. Sometimes he would be out the whole day and come in looking worn out and ill-what could be seen of him under his heavy jacket. Judging from the rare times Iruka saw his arms after those days, there were pockmarks and red streaks. Honestly, Iruka thought it looked like the boy had poisoned himself.

The blond's hands and arms were always wrapped in medical bandages. The one time Iruka saw them slip, the flesh underneath had been pale, but blotched with red, irritated spots and pinpricks of almost black which Iruka could only guess were Uzumaki's tenketsu.

Over the years, Uzumaki had developed faint shadows under his eyes. They were clearly signs of sleep deprivation, but not as severe as Iruka would have expected from someone so driven. The scarred chūnin wondered if those patches of dark skin were a permanent feature of the boy's face. Likewise, the tan complexion of Uzumaki's younger years had faded to be replaced with an almost sickly pallor from staying hidden in his jacket all the time.

It was hard to see anything of him now, though. The boy had taken to wearing orange goggles around his neck. When he donned them, they hid his upper face like a blank visor. Otherwise they hung loosely, revealing hooded eyes that were always half-lidded and bored. He'd taken to wearing a mask as well. It was more like a bulky scarf that obscured his lower face entirely.

The young chūnin eventually tore his gaze from the blond, working to shake the morose thoughts that always plagued him when he considered Uzumaki. Instead, he coughed to give the class one final chance to quiet down in response to a subtle hint. It didn't work, just like always. He always hoped that someday a class would realize that they needed to detect things as minor as his gentle hint. Oh well.

"SHUT UP!" His voice boomed through the room, cutting through the chatter with ease. It was a teacher-thing he'd learned. Parents had a minor version of it, but rarely did they achieve the scale needed for a teacher with a full-size class. Once the class was silent, Iruka gave them a proud smile as though nothing had happened. "Now we all know what we're here for today, yes? So let's get this over with. We begin with the written exam."

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As Naruto took his newly earned headband off Mizuki, he didn't even bother to hide his smirk. He made a small show of deciding how to wear it before he eventually stuffed it into one of the many pockets in his coat. Some of his "peers"-and he used the term with irony-had likened his coat to a pocket dimension, judging from the random bits

and pieces of things he kept stored, some impossibly large or otherwise unlikely. Mostly it was thanks to the large, hooded jacket. It hung open to reveal a mesh shirt under a vest, which accounted for more of his storage capacity. The rest was accounted for by his low-hanging, baggy pants covered in pockets-the pants were taped at the shins to keep them from flapping around.

He walked home slowly that day, enjoying the sun even if none of it touched his skin. The graduation exams had ended around lunch, so the hubbub in the village was muted by the sound of people busy eating. The noise would pick up again soon enough.

Naruto was back at his apartment before then, so he savored a blissfully lonely walk through relatively quiet streets. The main reason he smiled to himself was not passing; he knew he would pass. It helped that he had stolen the answer key from Umino-sensei's desk. He was smiling because team placements were the next day. Naruto knew he would graduate dead-last, so he had ensured he would have a spot on a good team. The best team, actually.

It amused him that the chūnin instructors still had no idea why his grades had suddenly taken a dive. It was simple: he had discovered that standard team arrangements called for the Rookie of the Year and the Kunoichi of the Year to be placed on a team with the dead last.

The Uchiha was obviously going to the Rookie of the Year. Naruto was fairly certain he'd never manage to bring his average up high enough to knock the brooding boy off his pedestal. Naruto's late start on his grades would have been surmountable, but his taijutsu was woefully subpar. The Uchiha's dip in skill following the slaughter of the entirety of his family by his elder brother had been far from enough to make up for Naruto's lack of skill in melee. It was reasonable to assume that the "Last Uchiha" would get the best sensei the village could be arranged. Therefore, the best choice to make was to be the dead last. If the price for the best teacher was being on a team with the brooding Uchiha, that was acceptable.

When it had begun to work, Naruto was a bit surprised. He was supposed to be just a student and outsmarting a chūnin (which is certainly what it felt like he was doing) wasn't supposed to be possible. Naruto wasn't book-smart and he knew it; he had gotten good at reading, but he didn't *think* book-smart even so. He absorbed concepts and ideas, but he couldn't memorize things. His best way of learning was still to read about something and then go attempt it until he figured out what the text had meant.

His thoughts turned away from introspection-another thing he had learned-as he arrived home. The old apartment building was abandoned by everyone else. At one time, that had upset him, but he now liked the fact that he had the run of the place. No one charged him rent and he had turned the entire building into his domain.

He walked up the wall to his apartment, since he'd turned the main entryway into a bevy of traps designed to prevent casual entry by civilians whose hatred for Naruto was still a mystery. When he opened the window he preferred to use, he blanched. The lab that had once been a bedroom was emitting an impressively large cloud of purple smoke. It didn't look particularly noxious beyond the fact that smoke shouldn't be purple, but Naruto didn't cook up things that weren't dangerous, so he was reasonably worried.

The blond was grateful once more for the rebreather he kept hidden under his scarf. He had stolen it from the hospital. It was a chakra-powered air-scrubber and purified just about anything nasty out of the air. In a pinch, it could use chakra to generate oxygen, but his research suggested that doing so was usually a losing proposition because of the drain people suffered.

He sucked down a lungful of cleaned air and pulled his goggles over his eyes to keep the smoke out. He rushed to the lab and opened the windows inside, letting the smoke vent. As it was, he felt the skin on his chest blister from casual exposure to it.

Outside the window, a small bird died as its heart exploded in its chest. It had been sitting on a cable. Before it could fall, Naruto's

chakra threads latched onto the body and tugged it into the apartment.

He made sure the gas had dissipated before closing the window. Then he looked down at the little bird in his hands, his expression detached. It wasn't like he was unused to seeing dead animals since he used random creatures to test his poisons. It was them or him and he was only willing to poison himself so many times with variants of the same concoction to test the new effects. And he definitely was not going to test lethal poisons on himself. On the upside, he'd probably developed a resistance to poison after years of intentional exposure to everything short of lethal doses to his most dangerous brews.

He looked thoughtfully at the bird he held out in front of him, moving his chakra threads about to find the most efficient places to place them so he could manipulate the corpse with the least amount of effort. He quickly eliminated six threads, leaving one on the back of the bird's back, one for each wing joint, and a final one split between its clawed feet. Suddenly, the bird shuddered with a parody of life, fluttering its wings experimentally before hopping onto a nearby workbench. It cocked its head so that its glassy, unseeing eyes looked over at Naruto, who looked back with interest as he forced the bird to extend and retract its wings again.

A gleam entered the blond's eyes as he rushed out of the room and up the flight of stairs to the top floor, which had been turned into his primary puppetry workshop. He carefully moved the current version of Dami out of the way of the main construction scaffold.

He wasn't sure why he even kept the old puppet, but he just couldn't bring himself to throw it away. Admittedly, it was no longer *really* his first puppet. Dami had been rebuilt so many times that the only thing that remained of his original incarnation was his name. But every time he decided to dismantle Dami permanently, he found himself unable to manage it and ended up rebuilding a new variant.

Naruto shrugged internally and set the bird down on the worktable beside the scaffold. He had absently flown it along behind him, not really realizing that he was doing it. It was a good sign, he felt, that he instinctively used his puppetry skills. He picked up his tools from a set of hooks and grinned brightly as ideas swam through his head, just waiting for him to pick out the ones that would connect together as though they were the pieces of a jigsaw.

It was probably going to be another sleepless night.

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Kakashi felt like burying his face in his hands as he looked over his new genin team. He would have to see about whether they were really his team or not. First, there was the Uchiha; that one was pretty much what he had expected. It wasn't exactly a good thing, but he could work with it. The boy would just need some attachments to the village beyond his self-serving reasons. And he needed to tone down that obsession with his brother, to judge from his introduction. When Kakashi had walked in to greet his team three hours late, the Uchiha had been staring out the window, not saying anything, despite his obvious irritation.

Haruno was... unique. Kakashi regretted expecting anything different from the top kunoichi. His own experience had been brief, but he still remembered Rin-gods, did he remember Rin-and she had been a fangirl. Still, Haruno had a depressingly one-track mind. Her introduction had been informative, even if it made him worry. She had been the one to scream at him for being late, and in a rather shrill tone that he was hoping was just a phase. He was also hoping that the grades couldn't be *that* misleading. There was *no way* she got to be the top kunoichi in her graduating class on written test scores alone-she'd *better* not have. So he was sure once he got her into the field and got a better feel for her skills, he would see whatever it was the Academy instructors had.

And then there was Uzumaki. When Kakashi had walked into the classroom, the boy had been asleep at his desk. He'd been covered

up as much as any Aburame. Even now, the hood kept nodding forwards and the glimpses of the blond's eyes Kakashi got looked so lidded that he was genuinely expecting him to fall asleep at any moment. The boy was supposed to be a one-of-a-kind prodigy- Kakashi didn't see it himself, but he knew he himself hadn't looked like much during his early years. He had no idea what made the Uzumaki a prodigy, though-he'd only skimmed through the Academy reports since to do otherwise would be a waste of his time if he were just going to fail the team anyway. Based on the blond's introduction, Kakashi couldn't wait to fail this team; Yondaime's legacy and the "Last Uchiha" be damned, he wasn't going to pass a team that was so obviously destined to have at least one casualty before they made chūnin.

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" Alright then," Kakashi was fighting to keep his visible eyebrow from vanishing under his hair having heard Haruno's introduction. He had to call it that, since it had contained all the information he'd asked for. "How about you, blondie?" He turned his head towards Uzumaki and discovered that the boy had actually fallen asleep during the introductions, somehow managing to stay sitting up all the while.

" Hey, Uzumaki!" Snapped Haruno. "Don't fall asleep! You're as bad as Nara-san!" She took a swing at the back of Uzumaki's head to wake him up, only for the blond to suddenly slump backwards at just the wrong moment. Her swing went wide and she lost her balance, falling across the blond's unconscious form.

Apparently, the impact woke him, since he raised his head and looked at the weight pressing against his chest. "Haruno, get off of me." His voice was clipped and cold, as though he'd found instead of a girl, some sort of tentacled thing on his person. It was that sort of disgust.

The pink-haired girl scrambled off the boy, scooting far away from him with a bright red face and a twitch in her left eye. She seemed

no happier to have been lying on his chest than he was about her presence.

He turned to Kakashi. "What did I miss?"

Kakashi forced an eye-smile onto his face, knowing that no one here knew him well enough to detect that falsity of the expression. "We are introducing ourselves. It's your turn."

Uzumaki blinked wearily, as though he'd much rather just go back to sleep. "My name is Uzumaki Naruto." There was a long pause and the blond began showing faint signs of discomfort with the stares he was receiving. He was unused to being the center of attention these days. He had become an enigma; the once troublesome child who had faded into the background. Even the Uchiha had become mildly intrigued in the strange student.

" And?"

Uzumaki raised an eyebrow in the shadows of his hood. Kakashi couldn't see it, but there was something in the way the boy held himself that told Kakashi about it. "And what?"

Kakashi just sighed quietly to himself. "Never mind. It will do." At this point, Haruno had recovered and she and the Uchiha were both staring at Uzumaki and himself strangely.

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And so here he was. Kakashi was left with an avenger, a blushing fangirl, and a narcoleptic prodigy. Great.

"Well, now that we all know a bit more about one another." Uchiha and Haruno glared at both him and Uzumaki. Kakashi took it in stride, since the two seemed to glare a lot. "I'll get right to the point. You three aren't really genin just yet. There's a last test you have to take." Even Uzumaki looked up at that pronouncement.

"I see I have your attention now. Good. That test you took at the Academy was strictly to see if you have the basic *skills* required to be considered as a genin. What comes next is the test to see if you have any *worth* . Be at Training Ground Three tomorrow morning at eight sharp." He rose and gave them a jaunty wave. Uzumaki had already fallen asleep. "You might not want to eat anything so you don't have to be sick." He looked at the sleeping blond. "And one of you let your teammate know." He flickered and vanished.

Despite his instructions, neither of the boy's teammates made any effort to wake the puppeteer or otherwise inform him. Uchiha simply walked off and Haruno was following him, trying to come up with ways to convince the brooding lad to go on a date with her. A few moments later though, when he was certain he was alone, Naruto's eye cracked open and he grinned slightly to himself. Now the fun began.

Or maybe in another five minutes. He was really tired.

(A/N John)

And so we reach the second chapter. It's been a while. Things have just generally been a bit busy for us recently and we haven't done as much writing as would be good. Still, I have a good bit of *Strings* that I can work on, so there's that. If I end up doing it, as Spoon will no doubt complain.

(A/N 2 John)

To us, this chapter really is the turning point in the story. Early as it is, this is the place where things changed. It doesn't seem like it now, but when we plotted this out and then looked back, here was where things took a different path.

(A/N 3 John)

Again, there are changes from the original. Some of them were just ones that seemed reasonable to me. Some are just a result of my preferences versus the original. Regardless, I hope it was enjoyable to read. This is a somewhat slow-moving story, but things eventually pick up the pace. A bit.

Chapter 3

"As every thread of gold is valuable, so is every moment of time."
John Mason

Wataru was a fairly plain man, even by his own standards. He was a bartender by trade after a kunai to the knee had forced him to retire as a chūnin. He remained on the reserve force, of course, but was content with his quiet life. Even when he had been an active member of the shinobi forces, he had never done anything particularly exciting. He had been too young to have had much real participation in the Third Shinobi War and had been fortunate to live on a steady income from C and B ranked missions.

It was a nice life, though, he had decided. And he knew the hardships those who served faced and was, therefore, always willing to listen when a shinobi needed someone to unburden himself with. Wataru reported to Dragon, the ANBU commander these days, as an informant. Sometimes he collected bits and pieces that never made it into mission reports and could be useful to the commanders of the shinobi forces.

All of this was why, when another brown-haired, dull-eyed chūnin he didn't recognize stumbled into the bar and took a seat at the counter, he just poured the tired-looking man a saucer of sake and nodded politely to him.

"You look tired, kid. Rough mission?"

The chūnin accepted the drink, picking it up and staring at it for a long moment, as though contemplating the possibilities it presented and the question of whether alcohol would make things come back into focus. Then he tipped it back in one go. Wataru smiled indulgently as the young man's eyes went wide and he began to cough violently. There was a reason he never poured the good stuff for someone who came back from a mission. The adrenaline meant

they *always* took their first drink like that and he would hate to see good sake wasted.

"You okay, kid? You look like you've never had a drink of sake before." Wataru considered that there were good chances he hadn't. It wasn't that his was the only bar in town, but his was the one that most shinobi went to when they needed to drink. Since he didn't recognize the chūnin (and he had to be a chūnin because he was too old to be a genin and no one made jōnin without Wataru having at least *heard* of him), he figured it was quite possible the lad had never had a drink before.

The chūnin waved away the statement. "That helped a bit."

Wataru smiled and cleared away bottles from earlier patrons who had insisted on drinking beer by the bottle until they walked into walls before heading home. "I bet it did. Do you want to talk about it?"

The chūnin looked down at the empty saucer and then shrugged. "Sure. You know Hatake-san?" he waited for the bartender's quick nod. "I just came off a mission with him."

Wataru gave a bark of laughter. He'd heard stories about Hatake Kakashi. He'd even been in the Academy around the time Hatake graduated. So yes, he knew who that was. He began to wipe down the counter. It was getting late and the older ninja would be coming in shortly for their drinks. "It bet it was rough. I've heard the man can be a real slave driver on missions and yet manage to be lazy at the same time."

The young chūnin gave a small laugh of his own as he put some money down on the bar. Wataru responded by refilling the young man's saucer with sake. "Yeah. I guess that summed it up pretty well. It was mostly routine, but having a jōnin along cranked it up a notch."

Wataru nodded again, cleaning the counter with a rag. "I bet it did, lad. Those guys are intense."

"Tell me about it. And those habits of his sure are something, huh?"

Wataru smiled down at the counter, seeing his face smiling back in the gleam. Then he turned his face towards his customer and gave him a grin. "Other him being late all the time? I've heard more shinobi complain about that than complain about Maito-san. You know, I heard he tells people he's only alive because he keeps being late to his own death?"

"No kidding, he didn't share that one. He was an hour late to the gathering so we could head out on the mission."

"You got lucky then. Rumor says he's usually more like four. I gotta ask," said Wataru, leaning forwards. "I hear all the time about the Shaingan he has under his headband." The chūnin's eyes widened slightly. "But I don't know if anyone's ever actually *seen* it."

The chūnin smiled sheepishly before taking a sip of his sake. "Sorry, I didn't have any luck there. He had his hitai-ate down the whole mission. And we kept wondering what's under his mask."

Wataru sighed as he leaned back. "I keep hoping someone will be able to confirm what he looks like. But I guess it makes sense, jōnin are always a bit odd."

"Thanks for the drink." The chūnin walked out of the bar, leaving Wataru to finish cleaning the saucers and glasses for the late-rush.

"Any time, kid. I never did catch your..." but the young chūnin was already gone. A few moments later, another patron who had been sitting in a booth put down some money and wandered out. Wataru had wondered about that one, wearing his hood up and only ordering water. But he knew shinobi all had odd habits.

Outside, the hooded figure walked down a few streets, subtly tailing the brown-haired chūnin, watching the young man disappear into an alley. The hooded person followed after him to find the chūnin waiting for him. There was a moment of silence before the figure let out a small laugh.

"You continue to amaze me with your acting skills, Dami." A chakra thread attached to his hand twitched and the chūnin was suddenly engulfed in smoke. When it dissipated, it revealed a man-sized puppet. Naruto had long ago refined Dami into what stood before him today. He'd shaved him back, smoothing out his body and articulating his joints. The puppet lacked any defining features, including a face on its head, and had been stripped of its combat features, but it was still useful for things like this.

"Or perhaps it's the stupidity of people that amazes me?" Naruto shrugged and unfurled a scroll from a pocket, using it to seal away the puppet. He withdrew a notebook from his pocket-dimension-coat and began to jot down what he had learned that night from the places he'd visited. It was a good thing he had decided to use puppets instead of disguising himself; he suspected that after four bars, he would be very drunk by now. Cross-referencing what he'd learned, he grinned in satisfaction.

"It seems your introduction was unnecessary, sensei," he murmured to himself. "I think I know all I need to now." He pulled a small, silvery bell out of a pocket and listened to its quiet tinkle. "More importantly, I know the trick behind your test."

There was no way he was being sent back to the Academy.

The next day, when the three genin arrived at the specified time, two of them were hungry from missing breakfast. All three looked tired at the early hour, but Naruto always looked tired, so he didn't count. Haruno and Uchiha were surprised when Naruto walked up to the meeting point on a small, red bridge carrying a small stack of books. When he sat down on one of the bridge's railings and began reading

at a remarkable speed, it took Haruno almost ten minutes to comment.

"Uzumaki, what are you doing?"

The blond didn't even look up from his book, which was an interesting, if rather stylized account of the Sannin's battle against Hanzō of the Salamander. "Doing something until our sensei arrives. I dislike not making the most of my time."

Haruno raised her eyebrow at the blond and looked down at the small stack of books. It would take her hours at best to get through them back to back if she didn't stop, and read in a hurry. Uchiha looked over from where he was leaning against the railing, mildly interested in hearing the blond say more than he had in months.

"How long do you expect to wait?"

Naruto smirked beneath his hood, letting out a small breath of laughter, but didn't answer, leaving Uchiha with a twitching eye.

Before the last Uchiha could comment, though, both his and Haruno's stomachs let out loud growls. He scowled and Haruno went bright pink with embarrassment.

"You two should go get something to eat while you can."

Both of his teammates looked oddly at the young puppeteer, but Haruno was the one who spoke. "Sensei told us not to."

Again, Naruto didn't look up from his book. In fact, at that moment, he was occupied turning a page. "Sensei *advised* us not to eat. There is a difference. Or do you believe that you will be sick from a mere test?" He smirked under the scarf and rebreather when he saw Uchiha rise from his seat against the base of the rails.

"Unless you have food in your pockets, I don't think we'll have time to go get breakfast."

Naruto shrugged, flipping a page. Haruno was shocked by the rate he was reading. He had often brought books to class, which the instructors ignored for some reason, but he'd never read at this pace. Perhaps he was keeping an ear on the lessons?

"You might be surprised. Still, I thought you might say that." Without looking up, he drew two wrapped packages from his jacket and threw them at his teammates. Haruno fumbled with hers for a moment before looking at it, her stomach rumbling on its own.

"But sensei said-" she was surprised to be cut off when Naruto raised his hand and made motions imitating a flapping mouth.

"Eat or don't eat."

Over the next two hours, Uchiha and Haruno ate their sandwiches and Naruto read. He was almost finished with his last one when their incompanionable silence was broken.

"Hello, my cute little graduates." Hatake grinned as Haruno yelped. Then realized that meant that she hadn't detected him when he wasn't trying to sneak and that was a bad sign.

"You're late!" snapped Haruno.

On the other side of the bridge, Naruto closed his book with a hidden frown. He had been a few pages from the end of it. "Morning, sensei."

Naruto's sensei raised his eyebrow, but didn't read too much into the nonchalant greeting. And the Uchiha's grunt would have been more worrying if Uchiha didn't often communicate entirely with grunts anyway.

"I think it's time to get started on your test." When he pulled the two bells from the pouch on his hip, he was a little unnerved by the sudden smirk on Uzumaki's features.

"So you all understand?" Seeing the quick nods from his genin, he tied the pair of bells to his waist where they jingled quietly. "Good. You have until midday." He produced a small stop clock and set it on a tree stump. "Then let's begin."

Instantly, Haruno and Uchiha vanished into the bushes, leaving Uzumaki and Kakashi in the middle of the training ground. The jōnin cocked his head at the blond with a bemused look in his eye. "You know that you aren't exactly winning points for stealth, right?" He caught a streak of blue light in the corner of his eye.

"I don't need to hide, Hatake-sensei. I already have a bell."

Kakashi's eyes widened as he watched Naruto raise a bell in the air and give it a jaunty tinkle. Kakashi didn't look down at his side, knowing that neither of the bells had been taken. "Are you in the habit of carrying around bells with you? It's not very stealthy." At Uzumaki's shrug, Kakashi continued. "Well, that isn't the point of the exercise. No matter how cleverly unorthodox your solution might be, the mission is to get one of the two bells I brought."

Uzumaki threw the bell to the ground with a sigh. "I figured it wouldn't be so easy. But I would be a poor ninja if I didn't try thinking outside the box."

"To be fair, I *am* impressed that you came prepared for the test." Kakashi was about to engage the boy in a bout of taijutsu-for motivation, of course-when Uzumaki's body was engulfed in the smoke of an amateur's substitution. It was a large cloud of smoke. Too large, Kakashi felt. That was inefficiently large for a substitution.

When the smoke cleared, though, all that was left was a hole in the ground a little wider than an adult male. A tip of something was vanishing down the hole. He instantly went on guard, wondering if he perhaps should have read the Academy reports after all. And, of course, the boy had vanished while he was focused on the hole. Wonderful.

For a few minutes, Kakashi stayed in the same position, waiting for aggression that didn't come. He had much of his attention focused on the ground, wary of whatever it was that had burrowed into the soil. His first thought had been that it had been some sort of summon, but he'd dismissed that. No matter how skilled the genin, it was simply *not* possible that a genin had a summon contract, let alone that he could actually summon anything even as large as a puppy.

Kakashi was tempted to lift his headband, just to find out what it was. With his implanted Sharingan, it would be easy to detect the thing. But there was no way he was going to bring out his trump card for an Academy student.

It was about that time he noticed his own shadow was getting slightly larger and caught a glimpse of a kunai shrouded by sunlight. He caught the extended arm easily enough and brought his knee up, both blocking the followup kick and following through by snapping his leg out and kicking the attacker away.

The Uchiha landed in a three-point stance. "You shouldn't be so focused on me, sensei."

Kakashi swung around, grabbing the first of the hail of shuriken headed at him and used it to bat the others away. He winced as the tips of his fingers began to tingle slightly and caught the purple-blue sheen of poison on the weapons. Well, at least they had the intent-to-kill down. He turned as Uchiha went on the offensive again, trying to take advantage of the momentary sting of poison to swing a hand by the bells.

"Shannaro!" He definitely was not expecting Haruno to attack while he was engaged with the brooding genin. She popped out from behind a tree and began to fling shuriken at the locked combatants. It was painfully obvious she had never practiced against moving targets and certainly not while trying to only hit one of two targets-what were they teaching genin these days?-and all it took was a bit

of footwork to place Uchiha between him and Haruno to force Uchiha to break off the attack.

It was only as Uchiha leapt back that the boy smirked. It reminded him that there was something he had been forgetting. Kakashi whirled around in time to see something erupt from the earth. He had expected to see Uzumaki and so was shocked to find something that was definitely *not* Uzumaki. It wasn't even *human* for tall that its upper half was female. And then the thing's chest opened and unleashed a spray of kunai in every direction. Unfortunately, at least one of those directions included Kakashi.

In his shock at the thing's sudden appearance and, well, its appearance, Kakashi could only dodge the kunai, blocking the obviously poisoned weapons with the shuriken in his hand or the metal plates on the backs of his gloves. And even so, he heard the tell-tale sound of steel on steel as something sliced through the metal wire holding the bells to his waist.

When he tried to grab them, they rocketed away from him and he instinctively ducked under a strike and blocked another as something long and thick whipped at him. He mused on the strength of genin as he flew across the field, flipping once and landing on his feet.

"Looks like we win, sensei," Uzumaki chuckled as he dropped into the field from a tree. Moments later, he was flanked by Haruno and Uchiha.

Kakashi gave his eye-smiled. "This is true." Kakashi wasn't happy about that. "But what are you going to do now? There are only two bells."

Uzumaki's grin nearly caused Kakashi to scowl. "What are you talking about, Hatake-sensei? There are three bells." He picked up the two bells from the ground, shuffled them about and tossed one to Uchiha and another to Haruno and still had one for himself.

Damn . Kakashi *could* call the blond out on his plan and point out that there were only two bells, but that would be ignoring the fact that they had worked together and successfully grabbed the bells *and* shown enough forethought to have set things up so that all three could pass. *Damn. Damn. Damn.*

"What can I say?" he sighed. "You pass." He pretended not to see Uchiha smirk and was trying to resist the urge to hurt his pink-haired genin who was dancing around like a civilian lackwit. It was nice to see genin untainted by war. He let them have what might be their last moment of unguarded happiness.

That was broken by the *thing* that slithered over to Uzumaki's side. Now that he had a chance to look it over, it was easy for Kakashi to identify it as a puppet. It was disturbing, though. It had the upper torso of a rather lovely woman and the lower half was a gigantic snake's body. Its eyes were whited out and he was fairly certain they were white enamel. It gave them a glassy emptiness that was a bit unpleasant. Its mouth gaped open, revealing long, pointed teeth arranged in a parody of a smile.

Funnily enough, puppeteers were one of the few ninja styles which Kakashi had never really fought against. His father, on the other hand... but that was neither here nor there. "Genin Uzumaki, at the risk of asking a silly question: what is that thing?"

Now that their excitement had worn off, both Uchiha and Haruno were looking warily at the puppet. Uzumaki was grinning and patting the wooden monstrosity with an almost affectionate air. "You like her?" he asked. "I call her Ramia."

Kakashi chuckled. Who was he to belittle the abilities of others? He was really regretting not reading those briefings though. And what on earth had happened to the Academy if there were puppeteers coming out of it with human-sized combat puppets? "As of today, we are Team Hatake." That was a sentence he never expected to utter. "We meet back here tomorrow at the same time for training and missions." He didn't miss the gleam entering his students' eyes at

the mention of missions. He figured that the reality of those missions would be its own dark little reward for him. "Ja ne." He gave a jaunty wave and vanished in a flicker and swirl of leaves.

He decided he could have had worse today. Certainly, they had shown some degree of teamwork and that was good. It was always possible he'd gotten lucky and he'd get to see a team of genin survive to adulthood. But he wasn't getting his hopes up.

Naruto sighed as he appeared in the treeline after the successful substitution. He had no idea how fast the jōnin would be, so he couldn't know if he could get away in time. It appeared he had. He allowed a small smirk to light up what little of his face was visible between the shadow of his hood and the bulk of his scarf. He made a note of where he'd tossed down the bell for later use and darted off into the branches of the trees, manipulating Ramia into what he hoped would be a position she could pounce from later. It would probably cost him all the kunai in her launchers, but Hatake-sensei had told them to aim to kill.

It didn't take long to find the Uchiha. The boy seemed slightly startled by the sudden appearance of the gray apparition in front of him. It was sad how few people looked up when they lived in a ninja village. Then again, his jacket was a similar gray to the Aburame standard, but had flecks of more sandy colors and greens that caused him to fade into the background in Konoha.

"What do you want, Naruto?"

The blond ignored the insult and grinned as he hopped down onto the branch the Uchiha was sitting on. "I'm here with a proposition." Uchiha's eyebrow rose. "Let me guess your plan: you plan to wait until either I or Haruno attack Hatake-sensei and then use the opening to make a dash at the bells, right?" Uchiha's face gave nothing away, but he didn't deny it either. "How about instead, you and Haruno create the distraction? Your taijutsu would be so much

better for keeping Hatake busy while Haruno lowers his guard. I'll be there to swipe the bells when he least expects it."

"And then what?"

Naruto shrugged casually. "You and I split the bells of course. We can both see Haruno is the weak link here and would only hold us back."

Uchiha didn't snort, not wanting to give away their position, but his expression said everything. "Says the dead last."

Naruto gave the Uchiha a stare that lasted a little longer than Uchiha was comfortable with. "Please. We both know I'm as much a dead last as Nara-san."

Uchiha's brow quirked and then he nodded grudgingly. "Fine. I'll go along with it for now. If you fail, I'll always have an opportunity to go for the bells myself." Never let it be said he couldn't follow a better plan with humility.

Naruto patted him on the shoulder with a hidden smile. "That's the spirit." And then he took a step and his cloak broke his outline up and let him fade into the background. There was no sound, only a sensation of empty space. Uchiha focused on trying to think of a way to get a drop on a superior opponent.

Haruno nervously bit her thumb as she lay under a bush, hoping one of her teammates would attack Hatake-sensei soon. The thought of going against a jōnin was daunting, even if she was sure that Sasuke-kun would find some way of getting the bells. She was busy wracking her brain for a way to demonstrate her use to her beloved when Uzumaki appeared behind her.

Naruto was unable to resist scaring the daylights out of the pink-haired girl. "Hey Haruno." He smothered her shriek with a bandaged palm over her mouth. "Quiet. We're trying not to alert Hatake-jōnin

to our position." That was enough to silence her, if not with any grace.

"What are you doing here, Uzumaki?" she had a sneer in her tone.

He hid his frown. "I came to tell you that... well, I understand." She blinked at that, not sure what he was getting at. "I get that at the end of this, only two of us can become a team." He would have bit his lip, but she couldn't see that, so he looked away instead. "I don't want to get between you two."

Haruno blinked owlshly at the suddenly bashful boy in front of her. "W-What do you mean?"

Naruto turned back to her, tugging back his hood. "I don't want to get between you and Uchiha-san. I'd feel terrible if I ended up on a team with him, knowing you were left behind, unable to show him that you deserve his love. And it would be awkward if it were the two of us on the team. Alone."

Haruno blushed a little. With his hood back, even with that scarf covering half his face, he had a certain handsomeness. His hair had gotten long since the last time anyone had seen it. It was long and tied back and actually looked cool-which she was having trouble accepting. "S-So what?" Her voice was slightly meeker than she would have liked and she realized with a start that she could hear the blood pumping in her ears.

Naruto gave her a look that suggested that he was smiling. "I already talked to Uchiha-san about it, and we came up with a plan. At the end of it, you two will get the bells." He chuckled in a way that sounded sheepish as he began to walk deeper into the forest, pulling his hood back up and beginning to disappear. "All you need to do is provide a bit of support with kunai or shuriken when you see them fighting. Another year of the Academy won't be so bad."

He vanished into the trees, leaving a red-faced Haruno to notice that he had apparently dropped a large number of shuriken which had a

sheen that suggested something had been applied to them.

A few moments later, Naruto quietly appeared on a branch that gave him a good overview of the training ground. His teammates would be so annoyed when he realized he had played them. Or maybe not. Either way, their reactions would be priceless.

Naruto felt like skipping home. Executing a plan was an enjoyment that was almost indescribable. Ramia was safely sealed away in a large scroll the size of his forearm which was in turn concealed in the back of his vest, under his jacket. He always had reservations about using scrolls to carry his puppets since damage to the scroll could damage the puppet within beyond repair or simply lost to the ether. But there was no better way to move large puppets and certainly no way to conceal them when not in use. Naruto had been forced to learn the art of sealing, at least the basics of it, in order to not have to carry around the big puppet that was his primary weapon... which happened to be larger than him.

Ramia was about seven feet tall when she reared up in her standard position, but she was fifteen feet long; long enough to constrict a man and conceal a multitude of weapons. She was currently his favorite puppet and certainly his primary combat one until he had a better idea.

Dami was certainly useful for what it was, but it was still a glorified mannequin. It had no real combat capabilities anymore. Ramia, on the other hand, was built for combat and every aspect of her design was meant to make her as efficient a fighter as she could be.

That said, Naruto subscribed to the idea of change. If he thought of a more efficient system, of a more effective design, of something that was just *better*, then that would be what he would use. There was always opportunity for change. Change was beautiful. At the same time, he pursued the ultimate in changelessness.

Change was a guide. Naruto sought the end of Change. Change led to better and better designs. Eventually, he would reach the point of making puppets that were perfect. Once he reached that point, he would need change no longer. Until then, he would enjoy the journey, feeling the rush of inspiration each time.

He hummed to himself nonsensically as he walked into his building, taking a moment to savor the scents of his cooking poisons, sawdust, animals, and resins, all drawn through the purifier to be stripped of their harmful capabilities. He gently tapped the glass of a small habitat-box he had built, watching when what appeared to be a long, thick stick, slowly woke up and reared its head, revealing a long grass snake.

"Hello there, Hisu. Feeling hungry?" The snake lazily raised its head toward the blond, flicking its tongue a few times before laying back down to sleep. "I guess not." Naruto shrugged and went about unsealing Ramia. He didn't like to keep his puppets in scrolls when not absolutely necessary.

Hisu, as uninspired as the name was, had been the initial inspiration for Ramia. That and actually controlling a puppet's legs was hard, so his first attempts at combat-ready puppets were all based on snakes. The problem was that human-sized snakes were hard to produce. A normal snake's skeleton wasn't able to handle the increased weight when scaled up.

Fixing it had been an interesting experience.

A younger Naruto, eleven years old, walked into the dangoya cautiously. He had been going around the village, asking where he might find a giant snake. He needed something that already existed to base his puppet on. He would have accepted a giant animal of any sort if he had to and would just try and guess how it was able to be scaled up and hope he could apply it to snakes, but everyone seemed certain giant snakes were an option. They also all pointed him in the direction of this place with nervous expressions.

As skeptical as he was that dango would hold the answer to his snake problem, he was willing to give it a shot. Unfortunately, the place was almost empty, unsurprising since the lunch rush had ended an hour ago. There were two people there. One was the owner and the other was a purple-haired kunoichi. He sighed and decided to get it over with.

"Hey."

Mitarashi looked up from her food and drink, quirking an eyebrow at the small form gazing at her. Surprisingly, it wasn't staring at her chest. Then again, it looked like a kid, so maybe it just hadn't gotten to that point yet? "What do you want, gaki?"

Naruto sighed again. "I asked a few people, and they said this was the best place to go if I wanted to find a giant snake."

Mitarashi's brows rose and her eyes twinkled. A sadistic smirk graced her lips. "Oh really? And what would a little runt like you be doing that you need to find a dangerous creature like that?"

Naruto's eyes narrowed under his hood. "And why does that matter to you, exhibitionist?"

Her eye twitched. The kid had guts, but it had hit a little close to home nevertheless. Then she grinned evilly. "Well you came to the right place, brat. You want to know where to find the giant snakes?" she fumbled about in her pockets, leaving Naruto to wonder how she kept anything without having much of anywhere with enough clothing to keep things. Finally, she pulled out a pen and paper. It took her a few moments to draw a barely legible map. "Here. Go to this training ground. You can find all the giant animals you can ever want."

Naruto looked at the map, examining the nearly childish level of cartography before grabbing it and wandering off, leaving Mitarashi to smile cruelly.

It was almost an hour later, as she emerged from the dangoya, still snacking on her last skewer that she heard the screams. She had been feeling a bit worried that the kid had actually gone there when she had only been willing to give the directions because he'd insulted her. It was unbecoming and she had resolved to go find him and pull his ass out of the fire. But first, she needed to see about the commotion.

The kid was back. And he was dragging a snake nearly twenty feet long down the street by its tail. He was struggling with the weight, but still managing. There were some rips in his clothes, but that didn't seem to be stopping his pleased gait as he passed by her and gave a salute. "Thanks, ninja-san! That place is great." Without another word, Naruto continued to drag the snake back towards his apartment.

She didn't stop standing silently, staring into space until one of her precious dango slipped from its skewer and struck the ground.

Naruto had meant what he'd said. Training Ground Forty-Four had turned out to not only be a massive boon to puppeteering, what with all the examples of giant animals which he had been able to use to understand how it was that animal could grow so large, it also had been a source of some of the most interesting toxins he'd been able to get his hands on.

His labs cooked and distilled chemicals from whatever he could get his hands on, but one of the best sources was the Forest of Death. Giant snakes and bugs had compensated for their tremendous size not by increasing poison output, but by increasing the potency of their natural weapons. The results had been gleefully collected and mixed into lethal concoctions.

In gratitude to the exhibitionist woman who had pointed him in the right direction he had created Ramia. More importantly, he had modeled Ramia's upper, human part on the woman. The fact that

enemies might focus on the top of the puppet instead of its lethal tail was all the better.

He'd have to thank that crazy dango lady one day.

(A/N John)

We figured it was time we publish another chapter. It's slow going because comedy is easy and drama takes effort, but we have plans for this tale.

(A/N 2 John)

For those of you wondering what insult Sasuke gave, it was the use of Naruto's personal name. In this story, I've kept to a more formal naming convention than usual, including the fact that it's incredibly rude to refer to another person by only his or her given name without permission. It's also why only one character at a time is referred to by his or her personal name at a time and that only changes with a full perspective shift.

(A/N 3 John)

I can't remember offhand what all I changed from the original here. Things don't diverge *too* much yet. Things will mostly follow the first iteration's story, but there will be some differences. When we come to the end of that, things get pretty out of control. Those of you used to *Itachi* will not find the same level of humor, but you may be used to seeing just how much things can spiral away from me. Spoon and I have planned this thing out way more than we ever do with *Itachi*, so I already know what kind of insanity is likely. Of course, given that it's me doing the writing, things are bound to get out of hand.

(A/N 1 Spoon)

John wanted me to inform you all that Naruto did not kill the 20 foot snake in the Forest of Death. He found it dead already. He wasn't *that* good at eleven.

Chapter 4

"Life and death are one thread, the same line viewed from different sides." Laozi

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The air outside Konoha wasn't quite what Naruto had expected. It was... plain. Having grown up in an urban environment his entire life, with the hustle and bustle of the village going on around him, Naruto had always imagined the outside world would be this open, fresh expanse. He had felt like Training Ground Forty-Four was the first step in that direction. Now, though, he was walking along an open, dirt path in the direction of Nami no Kuni, he could only be disappointed by the dullness of it. True, he had spotted a few plants he hadn't seen before and it had excited him for a while, but now he was back to dwelling on the monotony in silence.

They were here because after about a month of pointless chores that were called missions and what Hatake-sensei claimed was training, their sensei had deigned to give the team a C-rank mission. It was a hesitant decision; the man valued teamwork above all else and they didn't really have teamwork. But Team 7 was able to act as a cohesive unit when they had to.

It had been when he first got into reading that Naruto realized that the characterization of people he saw in his novels could easily translate over to real life. People had quirks and mannerisms that affected how they thought and acted. They had traits that could be counted on to influence decisions or choices despite what would otherwise be the logical option to take. All it took was a slight push in the right direction and Naruto could nudge people along the path he wanted.

Of course this worked better on some than others. Hatake-sensei, for instance, was a naturally cautious man, guarded in everything he

did. It was hard to work out how he would react to a given stimulus or find a weakness to exploit. Likewise, the Hokage carefully measured every action he took-which was proper in a shinobi who had reached his age and rank. Fresh genin, on the other hand? That was a different matter.

Uchiha was simplicity itself to twist however Naruto pleased. It was as if there were the same threads Naruto used to control his puppets attached to the boy. All it took was making anything a challenge or question his abilities and the young Uchiha was tackling the subject faster than Tora on a ball of catnip laced with sleeping drugs (long story, that). Likewise allowing the boy to believe that he was leading and he could be counted on to cruise along in a straight line without stopping until redirection was needed.

Haruno was just as easy. She just needed to believe that something would aid her precious Uchiha-kun or that it would attract the attention of the object of her affection and she would gleefully jump off a cliff. It was almost pitiable and Naruto had considered trying to remedy this defect, but it was just too useful as it was. That said, he *had* begun taking steps to make her useful despite her problems. Her studies in the basics of iryōjutsu were coming along nicely.

Really, all that had been needed was showing the girl an applicable use of her powerful mind, near perfect chakra control, and her natural instinct to avoid conflict-at least those she didn't start. Naruto was surprised that Hatake-sensei hadn't done it himself. Quite honestly, with chakra control that refined, Haruno could easily gone on to any precision-based skill, from pinpoint ninjutsu support to genjutsu. It was her weak body and cowardly nature that drove her away from those paths. It helped that every time Naruto gave her a compliment on her progress, as slight as they were, the Uchiha looked at her with the same look of bland dispassion he always used.

Haruno took it to mean that Uchiha was interested in what she was doing and would drive herself harder. It was a good thing, too; while Naruto's control was well refined, it was not nearly at the level

needed for medical techniques. He knew he would need to look into that sooner or later. The pleasant poetry to his mind was that the Uchiha was jealous; he hated seeing someone his own age surpass him in anything, even things he had no interest in. Uchiha believed he had to be the best at everything, even the things he didn't care about. It was a pathetically exploitable form of the superiority complex.

The best part of it all was that Hatake knew what Naruto was doing. The jōnin never came out and *said* anything, or even went beyond a disapproving look, but it was there in his half-lidded eye. Naruto didn't understand his problem. Under normal circumstances, Team Seven would be a horrific mess with two quiet loners, each powerful and disinclined to working with others, and a love-sick fangirl. It was Hatake's job to make them into a cohesive unit instead of merely three people assigned to a job together. For some reason, the jōnin seemed determined to go through the motions of teaching and no more. Naruto had decided that if Hatake-sensei wasn't going to take the initiative to mould them into a functional team, then he would have to take up the task.

That didn't stop the silver-haired man from trying to undo all of Naruto machinations. The man just didn't have the heart to be that manipulative to his genin, though. He would offer a counter-argument or opinion to the two subjects of Naruto's efforts now and again, but Uchiha's stubborn nature and one-track mind meant that he was disinclined to deviate from a set path because of someone else's ideas. And Haruno would follow the boy into the depths of the hells despite her own stubborn streak. Thanks to constant praise in the Academy, she was no more used to second-guessing herself or being criticized than Uchiha.

Naruto simply shrugged to himself. He was rather fond of the arrangement. His plan to get a good teacher had gone nowhere, considering Hatake's reluctance to teach them anything that wasn't focused on teamwork that they didn't have. But that just meant he was in the same place as in the Academy. Naruto had taught himself

everything about puppetry so far, why should things change now. But he was a bit disappointed all the same.

"Uh... is that kid okay? He's been pretty quiet." The bridge builder they were assigned to escort leaned across to whisper to Haruno. He clearly thought or hoped that the blond wouldn't hear his words. The old man was being taken back to his native country. He'd initially been skeptical about the three kids guarding him, but he didn't want to upset even an amateur shinobi-he'd heard stories. Plus, there was this unsettling feeling from the hooded boy, as if everything going on around him were just background noise. It was hard to describe, but every time those cold, sleepy eyes passed over him, he felt a shiver run down his spine.

"Oh Naruto? He's just... ah... well..." Haruno blinked and then frowned, looking across at the young man trailing behind them in the rear position, a few steps in front of their sensei. Uchiha was taking point while she walked next to the client. Hatake-sensei had opted for the more loose formation due to the rank of the mission. "He's... well... Uzumaki is always like this." She rubbed the back of her head and smiled up at the old man in a way she hoped was cute. She was working on the smile for Uchiha-kun. "You get used to it."

Tazuna nodded slowly, not convinced, but unwilling to argue when he felt Naruto's gaze sweep over him. "Sure. Well, you seem pretty level-headed, at least. But seriously, are you guys powerful? I mean, can you protect me?"

Haruno seemed ready to answer, likely planning to laud Uchiha's prowess, but Hatake butted in. "I've already assured you, client-san, that my genin can handle bandits and the like. This is a C-rank mission, after all."

Haruno nodded happily. She could handle bandits. Those were just normal people without chakra and Uchiha would be there to protect her regardless. And just like that, her gaze drifted off as she let her fantasies take over, leaving a sighing Tazuna and Hatake looking on.

The entire group was lost in their own thoughts. Hatake's eye wandered, watching the world around them as they walked. As such, he was the only one to notice the suspiciously wet puddle in the middle of the path. It was also the reason that when the two figures rose out of their genjutsu-cover and wrapped the jōnin in a chain of shuriken, the rest of the group was shocked.

"Sense-" Haruno's cry was cut off when the two assailants pulled the chain taut and shredded Hatake's body into bloody offal. She froze, her mouth going dry. Her scream died in her throat and she couldn't even lift a hand to warn Uzumaki as the two darted forwards, wrapping the hooded genin and attempting the same attack.

Instead of the expected sound of flesh being torn asunder, there was a dull thud as of metal being embedded into wood. The two attackers looked at the boy in shock. "Uchiha, now." With a puff of smoke, the Naruto in front of everyone transformed into the smooth form of Dami. Uchiha appeared above it, kunai in hand and ready to throw it at one of the two whose headbands identified them as missing ninja from Kirigakure.

When the two moved to dodge, they found themselves stuck. What they had thought was a strange substitution was, in fact, a puppet. The articulated fingers of the wooden man were holding the shuriken-chain tightly, forcing them to detach from their weapon to escape.

"What's a puppeteer doing here?" one of them snarled behind his mask.

Uchiha's kunai managed to clip its target on the arm and he rushed in to pressure the missing ninja, keeping him busy while avoiding strikes from the vicious gauntlet. The other attacker looked for Naruto, only to be forced to move as Dami attacked. The puppet had gathered up the chain and was whipping it through the air, flicking it at the man who had to block the chain with his own gauntlet.

It became quickly apparent that Dami was not a combat puppet. The ninja he was fighting managed to duck under a swipe of the chain and lunged forwards, cleaving off an arm at the elbow. The chain fell limply as Dami was forced to treat it as a whip and let it fall. The ninja moved in to finish off the puppet, ignoring the destroyed arm. Which was why he was surprised for the short moment he had when the stump swung up and fired a kunai with a pneumatic hiss that punched the blade clean through his mask and buried it deep into the ninja's skull. The man dropped to the ground with a thump.

A few meters away, Uchiha was embroiled in his fight. Sweat ran down his forehead and he was panting, hard pressed by the number of times he had to break off an attack pattern to avoid the claws of the gauntlet. He finally managed to get a bit of breathing room and immediately flashed through hand seals. Uchiha's opponent dodged out of the way of the telegraphed attack, but was shocked by the grand fireball launched at him long enough that a knee was able to slam into the back of his head, sending him tumbling to the ground.

The entire fight had taken thirty seconds. After the quick, intense, brutal experience, there was a strange calm as the genin surveyed the field of battle. Naruto dropped out of the tree he had taken refuge in. What little of his face could be seen was devoid of emotion as he looked down at the corpse of the man he had killed.

"Hatake-sensei! You're alive!"

Naruto didn't even look up as Haruno exclaimed over the survival of the silver-haired man. He'd seen the man substitute out of the way, which was why he had swapped places with Dami.

"Of course," the jōnin sounded mildly hurt. "You don't think an attack like that could get me, do you?"

Naruto continued to stare at the body. It was the first human being he had ever killed, even if it was the indirect method of a puppet, and he wasn't sure what he should be feeling. It struck him that it was odd that he even had to think about it. It was supposed to be

traumatic; that's what the books he'd read said. He'd taken the life of a sentient being, a fellow human.

Why, then, did he feel nothing? There wasn't a flicker of emotion in him. Oh there was the wondering if he could have ended the fight sooner and similar thoughts that a ninja was expected to have, but nothing else. He just stared with the clinical detachment he used when he dissected an animal on his workshop table. He picked out the way his victim had fell, noting the disposition of the joints and the way blood didn't drip much now that the heart had stopped.

"Naruto?" Naruto started as Hatake used his given name and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

The blond blinked once before the emptiness left his eyes, replaced by his customary blankness. He quickly shrugged off the jōnin's hand, but couldn't tear his gaze from the corpse. Why did he not feel any sort of shock? He knew he should feel *something* . Was he a freak?

"I'm fine." He was glad to find that his voice sounded normal. He didn't need to tip off his sensei that he was working through some sort of oddness.

"You did what you had to," said Hatake-sensei. "It's okay, you know."

That got Naruto to look up. He scowled, his eyes darkening for a moment. "I know. I said I'm fine."

Hatake hesitated a moment before quickly patting the top of Naruto's head, unhappy at how the hood kept him from ruffling the genin's hair. "Well, I'm here if you need to talk. A shinobi's first kill can be difficult."

Naruto's eye narrowed as he forced himself to look at places other than the body on the ground. It wasn't to avoid a disgusting sight or because it brought up uncomfortable emotions; he was worried that

if he looked at the corpse again, he might stare for quite a while. He needed something to take his mind off it.

"They had bounties, didn't they?"

Hatake blinked in surprise as he looked down at the hooded genin. "Hm?"

Naruto pointed at the dead body without looking at it. "Bounties. They're nukenin, right? The Demon Brothers, if I'm remembering the description correctly."

Hatake hesitated before a smile crept into his eye. Shinobi all had coping mechanisms, after all. "You kept up to date with the Bingo Book?"

Naruto smirked under his scarf. "Why are you surprised? You gave me my first copy."

Hatake's smiling eye softened slightly. "You remembered?"

"Please. There are only so many shinobi with silver-white hair and only so many with your rather distinctive style. As far as I know, the only one other than you who meets the requirement has been dead two decades. I was young, not stupid."

Hatake chuckled. "You never said anything."

Naruto didn't like having this sort of sentimental conversation, but it was better than staring at the somehow tempting cadaver. "Neither did you," he commented.

Hatake chuckled again and rubbed the back of his head. "Touché. Although I had merely hoped to inspire you to have a goal. I never imagined you would pick puppetry." He took the hint when Naruto shrugged and took a step away from the body. "And yes, they have bounties. It doesn't matter, though. It's too far a walk to the nearest office and that would count as a deviation from the mission even if it

weren't. We can't save it for later, either, since I don't have a scroll with me I can seal them into."

Naruto narrowed his eyes and stared into the middle-distance. He didn't carry scrolls for sealing human bodies; they were far more complex than the ones he used to hold his puppets. There was no point in carrying things like that. That would teach him. He always carried a few spare scrolls with sealing matrixes on them, but he would modify them so they could hold corpses from now on. He hated the idea of leaving valuable resources lying around to rot.

"The best thing we can do right now is send a message back to Konoha for pickup." Hatake turned to Tazuna with dark look in his visible eye. "And in the meantime, Client-san, I think we will have a little... talk... about the rank of this mission. Don't you agree?" Tazuna gulped as the jōnin's hand landed on the man's shoulder and gripped it tightly, steering him off into the brush for a quiet word.

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Despite Hatake's suggestion that they might end the mission there, he decided to continue onwards. The silver-haired jōnin had asked each of them what they felt before making his final decision. Naruto wanted to think it was inevitable. Uchiha would never back down from something like this-it was the first real challenge outside the safety of the village which would, therefore, let him push his limits. Haruno would follow in her sheeplike devotion to the Uchiha. Naruto thought that Hatake wouldn't abandon someone like the bridge-builder-especially with the sob-story the man spouted-given the jōnin's motto about standing by comrades.

Naruto, well, the young puppeteer wasn't going to give up this chance for anything. It was his first trip to another town and another nation. It was his first opportunity to make connections, meet people, begin a network. Akasuna was infamous for two things. One of them was his puppeteering, the other was the information network he was purported to have around the entirety of the Elemental Nations. Naruto had been eager to start a network of his own for years, and

this was his chance to begin in a place that didn't know him and he had a blank slate.

He wasn't kidding himself, though. As much as he would like to tell himself that Hatake's decision was unavoidable, he knew that the man was still a jōnin of Konoha. The village did not take kindly to people cheating it. There had really only been two options available, and since they'd continued on, Naruto knew which one Tazuna had taken. It meant that the bridge-builder had agreed to some painful rewards for the village in exchange for the increased rank of the mission.

Asking the three genin what they wanted to do had been a smokescreen to hide from them that they were being marched into a dangerous situation at the order of their commander. By all rights, Hatake could have sent the man on his way without penalty. There would be public revelation later of just what it would cost Nami to get Konoha's help and it would include severe penalties for cheating. The village would want everyone to know that there were consequences.

On the other hand, Naruto was aware that his goal of an information network had a slight catch to it. He had no idea how to build one. Just like everything else about his chosen path, it would be trial and error. The important thing was that he would have the opportunity and, in an oppressed place like Nami that would soon be in the debt of his team, he would have just that.

There was also the part of him that had enjoyed that confrontation earlier and was eager for more. It was the part he tried to ignore as a childish impulse. Nevertheless, after the conflict, he was more aware of his surroundings. He did not want to get surprised again. And *that* was why, when Hatake gave the command to drop, he did so without thinking. It was just as well, since a massive, spinning blade whirled overhead, buzzing through the thin mist. It slammed into a nearby tree and stuck fast. A large, muscled man appeared on the blade, facing away from them.

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"Well, well, well." Kakashi's voice was amused. "Momochi Zabuza, nukenin fro Kirigakure." The jōnin stepped forwards, his posture at ease. He raised one hand. "Stay out of this one, kids. Momochi is on a whole other level from those chūnin earlier." He blinked when he noticed a lack of a grayish form. "Uzumaki?"

There was a chortle from the man up the tree as he turned to face them. "What an amazing genin you have there, Sharingan no Kakashi." Uchiha's eyes widened at the moniker, his hand tightening around the grip of the kunai he held. "Running away at the first sign of a superior opponent. Smart, but cowardly."

Kakashi frowned behind his mask. Uzumaki didn't strike him as the type to run just to escape. No, that one would have a plan of some kind. Kakashi couldn't think, though, of how a genin, no matter how skilled, would hope to be of assistance in a battle between jōnin. "Haruno, Uchiha, stay back and protect the bridge-builder." His fingers gripped his headband and lifted it, revealing a spinning sharingan in his left eye.

"Ah... it seems I get to see the famed sharingan in action. Perhaps I should feel honored?" Momochi's gruff voice slipped from behind his bandage-mask as the mist began to draw in, blocking line of sight. Kakashi didn't waste time, he didn't know what Uzumaki was doing, or if Momochi had accomplices. He had to act. "Hmm... I didn't think you would be so hasty to act, Hatake."

For the genin, it was a split second and then Kakshi was up on the blade next to Momochi, kunai locked with the nukenin's. Sparks flew as they matched their strengths. Momochi was the stronger, physically, but Kakashi's stolen sharingan could read every twitch of Momochi's muscles and let him compensate.

In a moment that reeked of grueling training, Momochi kicked his sword out from under them, spinning the blade with his foot and catching the grip in his hands. Instead of being caught by surprise,

Kakashi bounced off the tree, avoiding the swipe that would have cut him in half at the middle. He twisted mid-air, catching his foot on the hilt of the blade and throwing off Momochi's balance, completing the motion with a scissor-kick striking the former Kiri jōnin in the chest. There was an underwhelming squelch as his foot passed through water from Momochi's substitution with water from further into the trees.

Kakashi didn't pass up the opportunity to move the fight farther from his genin. He easily caught up with Momochi, Konoha ninja being unsurpassed in trees. The two jōnin moved in flurried motion, sparks flying where Kakashi deflected the deadly bulk of Momochi's gigantic blade with a simple kunai. Momochi was stronger, but Kakashi was significantly faster and had the precognitive abilities of his sharingan to let him make use of it.

"You know, Hatake," commented Momochi from a hidden spot in the mist, "as Kiri ANBU, I had a standing order to eliminate you on sight. Hatake Kakashi, Sharingan no Kakashi, the man said to have copied a thousand jutsu."

Kakashi's eyes narrowed. There were more than a few of those orders, no doubt. "Fascinating," he replied. "In my years in ANBU, we never had such an order for you. You probably aren't dangerous enough." It was beginning to become a strain on him to keep his sharingan active, but with the mist up and fighting in Momochi's element, he needed the edge. Even if he only got glimpses when the blade cut through the enshrouding mist, it was enough to let him keep avoiding death.

Momochi's swings became more violent and Kakashi jumped back. Momochi landed on what he thought was a solid branch and found it snapping underfoot. Only long training let him hear the subtle click of a mechanism. It just barely allowed him to twist his body and swing his sword up between himself and the barrage of kunai that had been unleashed. Sprays of purple sent a chill through him-poison.

"Hmm..." this time his feet came down on a safe bough and he looked across at Hatake. "You couldn't have set up these traps while we fought."

The answering chuckle did nothing to reassure Momochi. "I think you'll find that it's the work of my 'cowardly' student."

Momochi looked around, suddenly more wary of things other than just the jōnin trying to kill him. "Interesting gaki."

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Naruto was currently a few hundred meters away from the fight, crouched in a tree and remaining still and quiet. Chakra threads spread from the fingers of his left hand in webs. The patterns formed between his digits told him the story of the fight, showing where the combatants were, how they moved, what they did. Hatake's movements were marked by a lighter touch than the heavy Momochi, and most of the time, they were quicker, too. In a straight line, Momochi could be surprisingly fast, though.

He used his right index finger to tug one of the dozens of interlocking threads and a curse from the direction of the fight was the reward as kunai spat from a concealed launcher at exactly where Momochi had been about to land.

A drop of sweat rolled down the back of his neck. His mouth was dry. This was *nothing* like the fight with the Demon Brothers. Hatake was right; Momochi was in a whole other league. The clash of auras sent chills through him. He could feel their intent to harm bursting from their bodies and each time it washed over him, it gave him a rush of anxiety.

It was exhilarating.

Naruto was terrified of the monsters fighting nearby, but he had never felt more alive. Even being a *part* of this clash felt like a privilege. He wasn't going to waste a moment of it. He stroked a

chakra thread and an explosion ripped through the forest from a concealed explosive note he had buried inside a tree trunk. The detonation, if he had calculated correctly, should send splinters the size of his hand directly towards where Momochi had been planning to attack Hatake-sensei.

He used the noise of the explosion to move to a new position. He couldn't afford to underestimate jōnin. Being found was not really an option-not if he liked living.

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"Rather annoying brat you have here, Hatake," Momochi growled as he leapt away from a second explosion coming on the heels of the first. Hatake managed to slide past him in mid-air, using his unbalanced state to cut his arm. He could feel blood trickling. He decided to land on the forest floor instead, the branches of the trees seemed to be sending death at him too much for his taste.

If Hatake would *just let up a moment*, the brat would be dead. The weird kid was moving, sure, but Momochi was a master of silent killing-he would be able to deal with it. But the damned silver-scarecrow wouldn't giving him even a moment to breathe, let alone hunt down a brat; every trap was giving the man another shot at killing him.

What Momochi didn't know was that Kakashi now knew were pretty much all the traps were. Once he had worked out it was Uzumaki, he was able to spot the threads of chakra, their glow hidden to sight, but not to the senses of the sharingan. Even so, Kakashi made a note to commend Uzumaki; the lad had hidden the threads under tree-limbs. It was hard to spot them in combat-and he knew what to look for and could see it.

A ripping sound accompanied Momochi suddenly losing his footing as a snare trap grabbed his foot and plucked him into the air. For a ninja of his skill, it was simple to twist his body and sever the line, but Kakashi took advantage and Momochi earned himself another small

nick as he was forced to kick the jōnin away instead of using the sword whose current angle made it impossible to strike out with.

Kakashi hid his frown. He couldn't afford to let this go on forever. He was draining himself with the sharingan and this was far from his preferred method of engagement. Normally, the first time that Momochi would have known about Kakashi engaging in combat with him was when Kakashi's Chidori punched into his heart. Open combat was more tiring and Momochi had the edge in having trained his physical endurance to use that giant sword.

And then it suddenly wasn't a problem. From behind Momochi, a familiar and horribly welcome sight burst from the earth. Ramia whipped her body around Momochi while he was still upside down, catching him in the air. Kakashi savored the moment of shock on the jōnin's face-what could be seen of it behind the bandages-there was no way the man had expected this. Ramia's tail pressed against Momochi's neck, the open hole ready.

"What the hell?"

Kakashi landed nimbly and wiped sweat from his brow as he covered his sharingan. "Good work, Uzumaki. And thanks for the assist."

After a few moments of silence, there was a quick rustling and Uzumaki dropped out of the trees. To Kakashi's trained eyes, it was clear the boy was working to maintain his composure. His features were hidden between the mask and the goggles and the hood, but his posture was shaky. It made sense, since Momochi was currently staring at him with murder in his eyes.

And it was definitely bravado that made the young ninja hold up his hands, forcing the chakra threads connected to Ramia to become visible. The message that Uzumaki could strike with just his fingers was probably foolish, but understandable in one so young.

"Sorry about not telling you ahead of time, sensei."

Kakashi sighed and looked at his student. "It's alright, genin Uzumaki. Don't do it again, though. There is no way you could have known what you were getting into, trying to get involved in a fight between jōnin."

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Naruto nodded at his sensei. He knew now just what it meant. It had been obvious that his traps would have been worthless had his sensei not been acting as primary aggressor in the fight. Ramia wouldn't have been enough if Momochi hadn't been tired already. It was a miracle that things had worked out the way they had.

Suddenly, Momochi's neck was covered in a thick layer of ice. Naruto's fingers twitched instinctively and the projectile loaded in Ramia's tail fired, slamming into the frozen water and failing to penetrate. His eyes widened; Ramia could punch through a tree with that weapon.

Naruto leapt back as a series of long, metal needles slammed into the ground. The puppet master swore in the privacy of his head. He had missed that the missing ninja from Kiri had an ally hidden in the mist. It was too late to wonder how he had failed to spot the second target when he'd been working around the forests on the side of the road.

Moments later, more needles thunked into a tree behind him. He whirled, trying to pinpoint his new enemy, checking the web of Chakra threads he'd spread around like a net. That was when two needles impaled his hand, skewering straight through bone and out his right palm. What was worse, that had been the hand controlling Ramia.

Hatake's mismatched eyes widened as combat-grade senbon skewered the spot his young charge had occupied. He should have known that Momochi had an ally. Thanks to the precognition of the Sharingan, he was able to spot Ramia loosening its hold on Momochi. That wasn't something that his genin could handle.

Naruto heard a crackling sound and the cry of a thousand birds chirping at once. Then what resistance Ramia had been leaving on his mangled right hand vanished. It was just as well; it gave him one less thing to worry about.

He flicked his left index finger and a few of his remaining traps fired even as he felt needles pierce his shoulders. In moments, he found that his arms no longer responded to him. He couldn't see in the mist and now his only forms of offense were gone.

There was a cough from the mists as Naruto spun to the side, his legs propelling him away from jagged shards of ice that began to pepper the area he occupied. But someone had been hit by his poisons. The only one he'd used that was inhaled was among the better ones he'd managed to develop. He'd distilled resin from an otherwise harmless tree that grew prolifically in Konoha. When combined with human blood and simmered for several days, it became a paste that spewed clouds of colorless poison into the air when burned. It ate at the lungs and acted on nerves, slowing reaction time.

It wasn't a fast killer, though. Naruto had never planned on being in this circumstance. He had always expected that the reduced speed of a target and the distraction of lung-pain would be enough to give him an edge, not to kill his target itself.

There was a detached part of Naruto that noted that even though he was in greater danger this time, he had less of a rush from this combat. There was no burst of terrifying energy that made him aware that he wasn't at the level of the foe. This was just someone trying to kill him-someone at his level.

He was getting tired. There was only so long he could manage with needles in his arms. The pain wasn't an issue, but the blood loss was only slowly tapering off and he still wouldn't be able to use his arms until the things were removed. Extended combat was never something he'd trained for. Especially combat where he had no weapons.

A masked figure dropped from the trees in front of him and casually dodged his kick. It had a face of porcelain-blank and unadorned. The figure drew back a hand with a pair of needles in its hand. The chirping grew louder.

Then Hatake was behind the figure. Mostly. The jōnin's right hand was sticking out of the figure's chest, blood dripping from his fingers and the whole appendage cloaked in electricity. Bits of heart dangled from Hatake's digits. The jōnin tugged his hand free and, as the body fell, slammed his foot on the neck, snapping it with a crashing sound.

Naruto blinked. "Wasn't that overkill, Hatake-sensei?"

The man shook his head, tugging his headband back down over his whirling Sharingan. "No such thing, Uzumaki-genin. There is only dead and not dead. Enemies that are not dead had best be that way for a reason-or you must remedy the situation." He took a pondering step forwards and gripped the senbon in his genin's left shoulder. "This is going to hurt."

Naruto tried to shrug. "Not a problem." His voice was as empty of emotion as usual.

Hatake yanked the needles free and dropped them on the ground.

"So, sensei," murmured the young genin. "Who gets the bounty?"

His sensei didn't respond. Instead, the silver-haired man fell on his face. Naruto wished he'd studied enough sealing to make his own body-seals. He sighed and pulled the remaining needles from his right shoulder and was about to toss them to the ground when he paused and looked them over.

They were ten inches long and made of heavy-grade steel. They were shaped like lengthened kunai, designed for throwing. He could use that. They would be able to better saturate an area. And they could be coated in poison. There was a smile on his hidden features for a moment. Ideas spun in his head.

Naruto walked back to Ramia. She lay there, a twisted pile of wood and metal. He scowled. She was completely wrecked. Something had punched straight through the joining of her tail and torso and had managed to blast out most of her chest as well. Mixed in was the mangled corpse of Momochi Zabuza, Demon of the Mist.

He couldn't help a slight shiver within the confines of his coat. He was alone; all he had left was Dami. He had no combat puppet, he'd used most of his supplies to aid Hatake against Momochi. It was uncomfortable.

It took him time to drag Hatake back to Ramia's remains, and then to gather the masked ninja as well. Slowly, he extracted his puppet's parts from the corpse and set them aside. It was a painful process to see how much hadn't survived.

He had just finished when Hatake grunted and raised his head. "Ouch." The man sat up, instantly alert. "Go get the client and the rest of the team."

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"Uzumaki-genin," murmured Hatake as the two of them walked at the front of the group towards Wave, the jōnin dragging behind him the giant blade Momochi had carried.

"Yes, Hatake-sensei?"

"I want you to take that battle as a lesson." Hatake looked over at his genin, his eye weary. "First: *never* play with an opponent. No matter how skilled you are, if you don't take things seriously, bad things can happen." He pointed to his covered eye. "I used this too much-I didn't end the fight quickly. And because of it, I almost got killed, which would have gotten you and your teammates killed as well. Do you understand me, Uzumaki-genin? Never toy with an enemy. Even idiots can get lucky."

Naruto nodded. "I understand, Hatake-sensei; risks are unacceptable. Do not let my pride get me killed."

"Good. Secondly, never take a prisoner stronger than you. Momochi was going to escape if you had tried to hold him there much longer. I killed him because he was at my mercy and I couldn't keep him captured while trying to help you." He saw Naruto's face twitch slightly, what little of it could be seen. "Always kill someone who you cannot beat in an unfair fight weighted in his favor. Take that to heart, Uzumaki-genin."

"Understood, Hatake-sensei." Naruto's voice was low and detached, with the formal inflection of a student to teacher. His body shifted, showing contrite thought. "I should have just cut his head off when Ramia took him. Keeping dangerous targets alive risks myself and others."

"Correct. Now, how long will it take you to get your puppet back to combat readiness?" When Naruto hesitated, Hatake continued. "I need to know how long I need to shift watches to ensure that we have sufficient coverage."

"I do not know, Hatake-sensei. It could be a day or two, or it could be longer."

"Expedite, Uzumaki-genin."

"Acknowledged."

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Naruto twirled a senbon between his fingers as he walked. They were small. That was not the key factor with storage seals, but it was useful when considering groupings. By using a swarm of smaller objects, he might slide one past someone's guard. Something to consider.

(A/N John)

So we finally publish again and it's a chapter of *Strings* ! We're been writing less because my schedule and Spoon's don't meet up as well and both of us have a lot of stuff we actually need to deal with now. Still, we're going to get some more work on *Itachi* in and we have a couple of other projects that managed to claim portions of our time. Depending, we may end up publishing some of them, although they are incomplete. I'm genuinely curious if people would prefer that we do that when we're working on longer side-projects (I refuse to publish a one-shot before it's done).

(A/N 2 John)

Somehow, Spoon has managed to get me in Naruto Online and this eats yet more time that I could spend writing or, better yet, being productive. Blame her for some of the drop in our writing as a result of her interference.

(A/N 3 John)

Not a lot else to say. Oh, right. Those of you familiar with the original version of this story will recall that Zabuza did not die here. While Zabuza is a highly capable ninja, Hatake Kakashi is one of the best ninja to ever live and the man was effectively at his mercy. He couldn't risk running off to help Naruto while Zabuza got free, so he took the chance Naruto would get hurt to ensure that a well-trained assassin wouldn't have the freedom to try and murder them.

(A/N 4 John)

As a result of that change, you'll notice something of a slight difference in how Kakashi and Naruto interact. Not exactly respectful, but Naruto is glad to take what advice is offered. Despite the man's appalling lack of actual teaching, the man is genuinely among the most capable ninja ever and any hints or

advice he gives are worth considering when he's not harping on teamwork and actually talking nuts-and-bolts of the job.